

DEATH AS THEME AND DRAMATIC DEVICE
IN THE THEATRE OF JEAN COCTEAU

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by

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: The purpose of this paper will be as follows: in Chapter I to study Cocteau's references and reactions to death in his own life; in Chapter II to discuss the theme of death as it appears in his theatre; in Chapter III to examine the techniques in which death is presented on his stage; to assess, in the Conclusion, the dramatic value of both the theme of death and its expression and the effectiveness and suitability of the mise en scène in the presentation of this theme.

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INTRODUCTION

An inconsistent and flamboyant pasticheur and a superficial dilettante--these are two of the reputations which Cocteau incurred during his life-time. André Gide, for instance, is said to have taken certain aspects of Cocteau for his portrayal of Comte Robert de Passavant in Les Faux Monnayeurs, namely his ambition to establish himself as a literary figure regardless of any artistic considerations and his associations with Parisian youths;¹ Eugène Ionesco writes of Cocteau:

Un auteur contemporain dont la tombe est encore fraîche, Giraudoux, ne passe plus toujours la rampe; autant que le théâtre de Cocteau, il nous paraît factice, superficiel. Son brillant s'est terni: procédés théâtraux trop évidents chez Cocteau;²

Both Cocteau's life, which occasioned severe censure, and the easily-won fame, acquired in his early twenties for poetry he was later to reject, have given rise to several misunderstandings over the vast output of his later works and de-

¹It must, however, be remembered that there was a certain antagonism between Gide and Cocteau at this time and that Gide was describing attitudes which Cocteau had already rejected.

²Eugène Ionesco, Expérience du théâtre (Paris, 1962), pp. 9-10.

tracted from a serious consideration of their artistic merits. It is the intention of this paper to discuss Cocteau's dramatic works as a whole, disregarding these two reputations which Cocteau repeatedly denied and which he repudiated by his later artistic creation.

Cocteau's artistic media were diverse but their diversity is only a superficial impression. Death in Cocteau's theatre, for instance, is inextricably woven with his many other dramatic themes and his concept of a poésie de théâtre. The multiple facets that death holds for Cocteau are apparent in the many words which he uses as synonymous with death; these include, la nuit, l'inconnu, le surnaturel, l'au-delà and le mystère. He also calls the forces of death the gods, death's assassins or the forces of the beyond, of order or of truth. The underlying unity in Cocteau's theatre thus **springs** from within the author himself, from his preoccupation with themes of the human situation, especially with the conditions of death and the artist, and from his expression and linkage of these themes which is peculiar to himself.

In Chapter I Cocteau's reactions and references to death will be studied, death being for him a principal preoccupation throughout his life. The theme of death as it appears in his theatre will be examined in Chapter II; because of the manifold aspects of death as a dramatic

theme it will be studied in relationship to other notions. Chapter II, therefore, will deal firstly with the minor connotations of death in Cocteau's theatre, namely the connection, for Cocteau, of death with the concepts of time, solitude, truth and lie, youth, love, beauty, disorder through purity, destiny and liberty, and angélisme, and then with Cocteau's most persistent association of death with poetry. Death will then be considered as part of the human condition in Cocteau's theatre, together with means of life--death communication and ways of responding to the anguish of death. In Chapter III Cocteau's techniques of presenting death on stage will be analysed according to the dramatic structure and to the different dramatic genres. Firstly Orphée, which is Cocteau's most complete expression of his notions on the death of a poet, followed by his other myth plays, Oedipe Roi, Antigone and La Machine infernale; then the fantasy plays, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel and Le Boeuf sur le Toit, where the use of death is both surprising and comical; the dramatic monologues, La Voix Humaine and Le Bel Indifférent, where Cocteau exploits the theatrical potentialities of the last minutes before death; the love tragedies, Roméo et Juliette, Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde, Renaud et Armide, with their prevalent atmospheres of unreality; the Boulevard-type plays, Les Parents terribles and La Machine à écrire, where Cocteau's techniques of

of presenting death help renew the Boulevard tradition; and, lastly, the historic plays, L'Aigle à deux têtes and Bacchus, the techniques in Bacchus being limited as it is principally a dialectic play. Finally the elements common to the staging will be studied. Because of the intricate relationship between theme and technique in Cocteau's theatre, Chapter III will sometimes refer to the theme of death in order to explain the technical presentation of this theme more fully. In the conclusion Cocteau's merits as a man of the theatre will be considered with respect to the dramatic value of death as theme and technique in his plays and to the effectiveness and suitability of the mise en scène in the presentation of this theme.

CHAPTER I
COCTEAU'S REACTIONS AND REFERENCES
TO DEATH IN HIS OWN LIFE

It is a commonplace to say that for Cocteau death was an integral part of man's existence and being. Death appears as an ever-present companion in an early poem of his entitled L'Endroit et l'envers:

Mort, à l'envers de nous vivante, tu composes
La trame de notre tissu.¹

Even at this early date it is apparent that Cocteau was haunted by the idea of death. This preoccupation is also to be seen in Le Secret professionnel:

La mort est l'envers de la vie. Cela est
cause que nous ne pouvons l'envisager, mais
le sentiment qu'elle forme la trame de
notre tissu nous obsède toujours.²

The frequency of this theme is evident as death appears in three more early poems. Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance is based on an attraction to death³ and the future is

¹Jean Cocteau, Oeuvres Complètes (Geneva, 1946-1951), Vocabulaire, III, 229. The Oeuvres Complètes will hereafter be referred to as O.C.

²Le Secret professionnel, O.C., IX, 191.

³Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance, O.C., III, 76.

envisaged in the Discours du grand sommeil as an ocean bearing a death warrant:

Voici l'avenir, l'océan
où ma mort flotte à la dérive.⁴

Vocabulaire evokes the imminence of death:

Je vois la mort en bas, du haut de ce bel âge,⁵
Où je me trouve, hélas! au milieu du voyage;

This preoccupation with death stems from Cocteau's belief that he lived in a special intuitive communion with death because he was a social outsider, as a result of his homosexuality, and because he was a poet, a machine⁶ which, when consciousness was suppressed, was receptive to the beyond. Cocteau states his belief in the poet's intuition of the realm of mystery and death in Le Secret professionnel:

. . .il (le poète) marche sur des sables
vivants et quelquefois sa jambe s'enfonce
dans la mort.⁷

Cocteau's awareness of the continual presence of death also formed the basis for his vitality and immense

⁴Discours du grand sommeil, O.C., IV, 24.

⁵Vocabulaire, O.C., III, 229.

⁶See also pp. 65 and 92.

⁷Le Secret professionnel, O.C., IX, 191.

activity throughout his life. Cocteau believed that his artistic activity staved off death; in Maalesh he writes:

Cette rage de travail m'a fait, à la longue,
une fatigue qui ressemble à l'athlétisme.
Si je me repose, je meurs.⁸

Cocteau states in Le Secret professionnel that it is this activity which is, for him, the hallmark of an artist:

Dans l'oeuvre d'un mort, dans le parfum de sa
sueur, je cherche un témoignage d'activité.⁹

If life is but a short interval for man which exists between his birth and death,¹⁰ it is better not to waste one minute of it. This idea finds its dramatic expression in Orphée:

Orphée: Nous perdons un temps précieux.

Heurtebise: Ces bonnes paroles vous
sauvent, Orphée¹¹

References to the deaths of family, friends and acquaintances reappear, often undisguised, in Cocteau's works and serve as a point of departure for his artistic creation. The remainder of this chapter will illustrate some of Cocteau's experiences and reactions to death in his own life.

⁸Maalesh (Paris, 1949), p. 69.

⁹Le Secret professionnel, O.C., IX, 159.

¹⁰See also pp. 22 and 70.

¹¹Orphée, O.C., V, 55.

In 1898 Cocteau's father committed suicide. Cocteau was later to assimilate this fact into part of his mystique or living legend. In a television interview he said:

Nous étions une famille au bord de la ruine; d'ailleurs mon père s'est suicidé dans des circonstances qui feraient que personne ne se suiciderait plus maintenant.¹²

The same disparity between an event and Cocteau's later distorted or exaggerated account of that same event is apparent in his statement that the year 1900 signified nothing to him but Nietzsche's death; Cocteau was but eleven years old at the time.

Cocteau was also to assimilate his experiences of death into his artistic creation. Two poems in the collection La Lampe d'Aladin¹³ commemorate the suicide of Raymond Laurent in Venice in 1908,¹⁴ one of them being dated the day after the suicide. Years later the event was transposed to form the basis of the novel Le Grand Ecart. Likewise the

¹²E. Sprigge and J.-J. Kihm, Jean Cocteau, l'homme et les miroirs (Paris, 1968), p. 28. The circumstances of the suicide are ambiguous; Cocteau was referring either to his father's financial straits or to the latter's discovery of a rumour that Cocteau was not, in fact, his son.

¹³The two poems referred to are Souvenir d'un soir d'automne au jardin Eaden and En Manière d'épithaphe, the latter being dedicated to the memory of R.L.

¹⁴An account of this incident is to be found in Première année, no. 1 (15 January 1909), entitled "In Memoriam Raymond Laurent", and signed Akademos.

death of Catulle Mendès¹⁵ becomes one of Cocteau's reflections in his Portraits-souvenir¹⁶ and is the source of the figure Pygamon in Le Potomak.¹⁷

Cocteau suffered acutely whenever a close friend died. On the death of Jean Le Roy¹⁸ he wrote to André Gide:

Je vous écris parce que je souffre. On
a tué mon pauvre ami Jean Le Roy que
j'adorais et pour qui j'étais tout. . . .
Chaque jour m'emporte davantage et jè
n'arrive pas à comprendre que c'est
possible.¹⁹

The incident finds its poetic expression in a poem entitled Batterie in which Cocteau pleads:

Fais-moi un peu m'habituer,
à ce que mon pauvre ami Jean soit tué.²⁰

Cocteau's assimilation and aggrandizement of certain events is to be seen again in his reactions to the deaths

¹⁵ Catulle Mendès, a poet and man of the theatre, died in 1909.

¹⁶ Portraits-souvenir, O.C., XI, 100-106.

¹⁷ Le Potomak, O.C., II, 97-108.

¹⁸ Jean Le Roy was killed in action in 1918. Cocteau wrote a preface to his novel Cavalier de Frise and dedicated his Discours du grand sommeil to him.

¹⁹ E. Sprigge and J.-J. Kihm, Jean Cocteau, l'homme et les miroirs, p. 107. The letter is dated 24th May, 1917 and is to be found in the Fonds André Gide, Bibl. Doucet, Y-547-22.

²⁰ Poésies, O.C., III, 115.

of Roland Garros²¹ and Marcel Proust.²² On Garros' death Cocteau maintained that the aircraft's cabin was littered with works taken from Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance which he had dedicated to Garros. Cocteau also claimed that it was at Proust's death-bed that Gaston Gallimard agreed to publish Thomas l'Imposteur.²³ On the occasion of Proust's death Cocteau, as one of his literary associates, wrote two articles.²⁴ The deaths of well-known artists were a direct cause for Cocteau's writing and articles such as these show him to be a man of great sensitivity, totally involved in the artistic life of his age, a man who became quickly attached to the people he met and who was greatly afflicted by their deaths.

Cocteau's artistic connections were also apparent when he was asked to write a tribute to Guillaume Apollinaire. Cocteau's letter to André Salmon on the occasion of Apollinaire's death reveals some of his great respect for

²¹Garros, a pilot, died during World War I and to Cocteau represented a freedom from the constraints of the earth.

²²Proust died in 1905.

²³Whatever the truth of the matter the novel appeared less than a year later.

²⁴Both articles are to be found in Quelques articles, O.C., X. The first article is entitled "La Voix de Marcel Proust" and contains some of Cocteau's recollections of the work, habits and characteristics of Marcel Proust; the second article is entitled "La Leçon des Cathédrales" and relates Cocteau's visit to Proust's death chamber.

the poet and his extremely sensitive reaction to his death:

Le pauvre Apollinaire est mort. Picasso est trop triste pour écrire: il me demande de le faire et de m'occuper des mots de journaux. Je n'en ai aucune habitude: voulez-vous être assez bon pour vous en charger? Apollinaire ne s'est pas vu mourir. Mon docteur espérait le sauver, mais il avait les deux poumons atteints.²⁵ Il est parvenu à vivre par un miracle d'énergie jusqu'à cinq heures. Son visage est calme et tout jeune.²⁶

It was the death of Raymond Radiguet in 1923 which proved to be the most deeply-felt loss in Cocteau's whole life and which was the cause of a turning-point in his career. Radiguet had been Cocteau's inspiration both in the art of living and of writing. His death left Cocteau without any anchorage:

. . .comme je tenais de lui mon peu de clairvoyance, sa mort m'a laissé sans directives, incapable de mener ma barque, d'aider mon oeuvre et d'y pourvoir.²⁷

Cocteau's obsession with Radiguet's death, his affliction and complete disorientation pervade his Lettre à Jacques Maritain in which he describes in surgical terms²⁸ the

²⁵ Apollinaire died in an epidemic of Spanish influenza; his health had already been undermined by a war wound.

²⁶ A letter written on 9th November 1918 and kept in the Collection Adéma; published in Europe, (November-December 1966).

²⁷ Jean Cocteau, La Difficulté d'être (Monaco, 1957), p. 40.

²⁸ See also p. 103.

terrible wrench caused by Radiguet's death:

La mort de Radiguet m'avait opéré sans chloroforme.²⁹

For a time nothing could fill this void for Cocteau, not even his trips to the Mediterranean with Serge de Diaghilew,³⁰ or his acting in Roméo et Juliette. His prostration was visible to all. In his Lettre à Jacques Maritain Cocteau recalls the words of his dresser:

Mon habilleuse avait l'habitude de dire:
"Avant la mort de Monsieur Jean "ou"
après la mort de Monsieur Jean". . . .³¹

Oblivion could be found neither in action or sleep:

La perspective du réveil m'empêchait de bien dormir et dirigeait mes rêves.³²

Cocteau became so prostrate that he repeatedly threatened suicide, but, in the final analysis, rejected it as a form of cheating:

Je cherchais le suicide et j'absorbais des doses massives (d'opium), . . . Le suicide est tricherie. . . . En somme on me chasse du Suicide-Club pour n'avoir pas su tricher.³³

²⁹ Lettre à Jacques Maritain, O.C., IX, 277.

³⁰ "On m'entraîna à Monte-Carlo . . .", ibid., p. 277.

³¹ Ibid., p. 278.

³² Ibid., p. 279. Cocteau did, however, find some small comfort in sleep which was preferable to a living death; ibid., p. 288: "Le sommeil restait mon dernier refuge. Sortir du sommeil c'était la mort".

³³ Ibid., p. 282. Another expression of Cocteau's rejection of suicide is to be found in a letter he wrote to the Abbé Mugnier published in E. Sprigge and J.-J. Kihm, Jean Cocteau, l'homme et les miroirs, p. 156. The letter

Cocteau could only hope that death would come and claim him too:

. . .je n'ai jamais joué la scène du duel (dans Roméo et Juliette) sans espérer que ma pantomime tromperait la mort, la déciderait à me prendre.³⁴

Cocteau also took to smoking opium more regularly and in greater quantities in order to deaden his awareness and physical pain. However, he admits to this being an evasion of reality and of life:

. . .moi, toujours rétif à l'orientalisme, je choisis le tapis volant. . .Ma fuite dans l'opium, c'est la "Flucht in die Krankheit" de Freud.³⁵

A year later, however, Cocteau underwent a cure of dis-intoxication, for he realized that the sensation of comfort given by opium was just an illusion and did not relieve his affliction:

Il (l'opium) escamote les souffrances.
Elles attendent en cachette.³⁶

reads: "Hélas! je devine que rien ne me sortira plus d'où je me trouve. La mort de mon pauvre enfant m'a porté dernier coup, mieux vaudrait la mort que la demi-mort où le seul désir de ne pas atteindre maman m'oblige à vivre. L'amitié, le ciel ne me portent plus de secours. Il me faudrait ce que vous savez et on ne le commande pas". The rejection of any sort of cheating is dramatically expressed in Orphée, O.C., V, 67.

³⁴Lettre à Jacques Maritain, O.C., IX, 278.

³⁵Ibid., p. 279.

³⁶Ibid., p. 283. Cocteau took up the smoking of opium again later as he felt that he needed equilibrium and that a false equilibrium was preferable to none at all. See also p. 74.

Cocteau had also turned for comfort to the Catholic faith under the influence of the Thomist, Jacques Maritain. He came to accept the consolation offered to him that God had only given him his friends on borrowed time before He recalled them to Heaven:

Il (Dieu) m'envoyait une amitié, me l'ôtait, m'en envoyait une autre et ainsi de suite. Sept fois, il a jeté sa ligne et l'a remontée sans me prendre. Je lâchais l'amorce et je retombais stupidement.³⁷

Religious conformity, however, was not for long compatible with Cocteau's concept of the liberty of the individual³⁸ and he gradually became less and less a practising Catholic.

In these ways Cocteau became increasingly preoccupied with what the death of Radiguet could signify and with what possible means he himself could find to approach and interrogate death. Following Radiguet's advice to be himself and not to follow any established order, Cocteau took to questioning death in different art forms. It is a theme which returns time and time again in his works. Orphée, performed two years after Radiguet's death, is, for instance,

³⁷Lettre à Jacques Maritain, p. 274. This idea finds its poetic expression in Requiem and Cri Ecrit.

³⁸See also, p. 25.

a meditation on the death of the poet.³⁹

The deaths of Satie⁴⁰ in 1925, of Isadora Duncan⁴¹ in 1927 and of Anna de Noailles⁴² in 1933 all marked for Cocteau the end of an era and provided him with some memories for the material of his poésie de critique. Of Satie's death Cocteau writes:

Il allonge la liste des deuils qui me rendent la vie écoeurante.⁴³

Cocteau's growing awareness of the closeness of death and its daily encroachment is to be seen in his reaction to his mother's death in 1942 when he realized that he himself was no longer young.

During World War II two of Cocteau's closest friends died, Jean Desbordes⁴⁴ after torture as a member of the

³⁹ See also p. 100.

⁴⁰ Satie had collaborated with the music to Parade.

⁴¹ Cocteau admired Isadora Duncan for her innovations in dance forms. He speaks of her in Portraits-souvenir and in Le Mystere laïc and transposes her death into material for Les Enfants terribles and La Machine infernale.

⁴² The closeness between Cocteau and Anna de Noailles is to be seen in Cocteau's letter published in Coupures de presse, O.C., X, 329-330.

⁴³ Le Coq et l'arlequin, O.C., IX, 68.

⁴⁴ Jean Desbordes met Cocteau in the early 1920's and replaced Radiguet as Cocteau's protégé. He himself faded from Cocteau's life to be replaced by Marcel Khill. Cocteau wrote the preface to Desbordes' book J'Adore which aroused the hostility of Claude Mauriac.

French Resistance and Max Jacob⁴⁵ from catching pneumonia after his arrest by the Gestapo. Both these deaths increased Cocteau's feeling of isolation.

The accumulation of these deaths is apparent from a passage in La Difficulté d'être; Cocteau writes:

L'avion de Garros brûle. Il tombe. Jean Le Roy range mes lettres en éventail sur sa cantine. Il empoigne sa mitrailleuse. Il meurt. La typhoïde m'emporte Radiguet. Marcel Khill⁴⁶ est tué en Alsace. La Gestapo torture Jean Desbordes.⁴⁷

The deaths of these seemingly fated young men turned Cocteau away from such young companions:

Aujourd'hui l'instinct paternel m'en éloigne. Je me tourne vers ceux qui ne portent pas l'étoile noire.⁴⁸

Cocteau's bewilderment is clear in Cri Ecrit, a poem which he wrote in grief after the death of some young friends; he

⁴⁵ Max Jacob, who died in 1944, reached a well-known artistic standing around 1920. He had known Picasso, written surrealist-type novels and in 1921 was converted to Catholicism. Cocteau refers to him in Carte Blanche, O.C., IX, 110-111.

⁴⁶ Marcel Khill met Cocteau in 1931 and became his lover. He accompanied Cocteau on his world trip (Cocteau refers to him as Passepartout) and he died at the end of World War II.

⁴⁷ Jean Cocteau, La Difficulté d'être, p. 92.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 93. See also p. 40.

wonders:

De mourir aucun n'avait l'âge;
Mon Dieu où les avez-vous mis?⁴⁹

Cocteau appears to be the most deeply afflicted by the deaths of fellow artists and of people he had known as a result of his interest in various art forms and his being an active man of the theatre. The death of his sister in 1958 seems to have had little effect on him whereas the deaths of fellow artists and collaborators such as Bérard, Gide, Eluard, Colette, Martin du Gard, Poulenc and Piaf all seem to have moved him deeply, for they were all friends of long standing. Their deaths also increased Cocteau's feeling of solitude⁵⁰ which he describes in Maalesh:

J'y songé (à une certaine phrase), chaque fois que tombe du navire un des passagers de mon voyage. Il en tombe beaucoup, et je reste sur le pont, regardant les vagues qui les dévorent et qui s'en moquent.

Le dernier tombé, Christian Bérard, me laisse un vide qui ressemble à quelque mal de mer, un mal au coeur de l'âme insupportable.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Cri Ecrit, O.C., III, 271.

⁵⁰ See also p. 20.

⁵¹ Maalesh, p. 9.

Cocteau describes Christian Bérard's death⁵² in Maalesh, for Bérard died while preparing the décor and costumes for La Machine infernale. Cocteau always used to say that the death of Bérard only increased his amount of work; he writes:

J'ai dit que la mort de Valéry,⁵³ de Giraudoux,⁵⁴ de Bérard avait doublé, triplé, quadruplé mon travail. Je voulais dire que les préfaces, les décors, les costumes, les signatures qu'on leur demandait, on me les demande.⁵⁵

Gide's death produced the same impact on Cocteau.

Cocteau describes this event in an article:

Dans cette traversée que nous faisons tous ensemble, voilà encore un homme qui tombe à la mer. Et lequel? Celui qui soutenait et qui surveillait notre équipage.⁵⁶

⁵²Christian Bérard died in 1949. He had collaborated with Cocteau on Parade and had designed many sets and costumes for Cocteau's later plays. Cocteau dedicated his film Orphée to him and Bérard also collaborated on the films Les Parents terribles and La Belle et la Bête.

⁵³Valéry died in 1945.

⁵⁴Giraudoux died in 1944. See also pp. 20 and 23.

⁵⁵Maalesh, p. 54.

⁵⁶A facsimile of this article found in Adam 300 (London, 1966), p. 149.

Despite their earlier antagonism Cocteau was upset by the death of Gide in 1951; he contributed an article⁵⁷ to a special issue on Gide in La Nouvelle Revue Française in which he refers to their alternately crossed and favourable relationship and to the numerous facets of Gide's personality. Cocteau also speaks of his grief and isolation on this occasion in a letter to Mary Hoeck; he writes:

La mort de Gide m'a fait beaucoup de
peine. . . .Et le pont de notre traversée
se vide peu à peu.⁵⁸

The deaths of Bérard and of Gide, had been preceded by those of Cocteau's mother, Jean de Polignac, Jean Giraudoux and Edouard Bourdet⁵⁹ and were themselves soon followed by those of Paul Eluard,⁶⁰ Colette,⁶¹ Roger Martin du Gard and Francis Poulenc,⁶² all of which deeply affected Cocteau and reflect his growing isolation.

⁵⁷The article is entitled "On ne peut se permettre. . ." and is to be found in Hommages à André Gide, 1869-1961, La Nouvelle Revue Française (November 1951).

⁵⁸A letter published by E. Sprigge and J.-J. Kihm, Jean Cocteau, l'homme et les miroirs, p. 329.

⁵⁹Edouard Bourdet died in 1945; he was a Boulevard playwright.

⁶⁰Paul Eluard died in 1952.

⁶¹Cocteau was very close to Colette. They once lived in the same immeuble and had lived through the same artistic changes together. At her death in 1954 Cocteau occupied her chair in the Belgian Academy.

⁶²Francis Poulenc died in 1963; a composer, he had

Cocteau marked these deaths by engaging in different forms of artistic activity and the diversity of his talents is clearly visible in such commemorative works:

Ma mère, Jean de Polignac, Jean Giraudoux,
Edouard Bourdet, sont les morts avec les-
quels, ces derniers temps, j'ai eu commerce.
Sauf Jean de Polignac, jé les ai dessinés. . . .⁶³

Cocteau noted the deaths of Paul Eluard and Roger Martin du Gard in different ways; Eluard's death occasioned several drawings and a poem in Clair-Obscur. In an article in La Nouvelle Revue Française⁶⁴ Cocteau expresses his gratitude to Martin du Gard for perceiving the enthusiasm he (Cocteau) had felt for poetry in his youth.

All these deaths underlined Cocteau's increasing isolation and his growing sense of the nearness of his own death, for he had known all these people for many years. These feelings Cocteau states in his article on Roger Martin du Gard:

Sa mort (celle de Roger Martin du Gard)
allonge la liste des passagers qui
tombent à la mer au terme de mon voyage.
Il ne s'agit pas de générations, mais,

collaborated on Parade and was a member of the group of "Six".

⁶³La Difficulté d'être, p. 143. Cocteau also describes his drawing Giraudoux in Hommages, O.C., XI, 460-461.

⁶⁴The article is entitled "Devenir ou l'âme exquise de Roger Martin du Gard" in La Nouvelle Revue Française, Hommage à Roger Martin du Gard, 1881-1958 (December 1st, 1958).

entre vingt et soixante ans, des seigneurs
auprès desquels j'ai eu la chance de vivre
une longue période, avant que Dieu sait
quelle vague de fond les emporte.⁶⁵

The news of Edith Piaf's death⁶⁶ only brought
further suffering to Cocteau. He had known her for many
years and her death increased his feeling of suffocation.
He told reporters:

La mort d'Edith Piaf me donne de nouveaux
étouffements.⁶⁷

He had promised an interview to reporters but he himself
died before he could give it. Previously, however, he had
made a radio tribute.⁶⁸

Cocteau had suffered from heart attacks in the
later years of his life, the first one occurring in 1954.
Death had become so familiar a part of his world that he
was no longer afraid of it; he writes:

J'ai traversé des périodes tellement
insupportables que la mort me semblait
quelque chose de délicieux. J'y ai pris
l'habitude de ne pas la craindre et de
l'observer face à face.⁶⁹

N.R.F. ⁶⁵"Devenir ou l'âme exquise de Roger Martin du Gard",

⁶⁶Edith Piaf died in 1963. Cocteau had written his
monologues, Le Bel Indifférent and Le Fantôme de Marseille,
for her. References to Cocteau and Edith Piaf are to be found
in Figaro (October 19, 1963).

⁶⁷E. Sprigge and J.-J. Kihm, Jean Cocteau, l'homme et
les miroirs, p. 346.

⁶⁸Cocteau was always willing to use any of the modern
media. See also pp. 77 and 160.

⁶⁹La Difficulté d'être, p. 143.

During his final illness he is reported to have said to his servant, Madeleine:

Mais non je n'ai pas peur de mourir, mon pauvre petit, puisqu'on est venu au monde pour cela. C'est seulement le moment du passage que je crains.⁷⁰

Death, in fact, Cocteau feared, not for himself, but for others:

J'étais aussi mort avant de naître que je le serai après avoir vécu.⁷¹ Je n'ai peur que de la mort des autres.⁷²

Cocteau had been aware for a long time, that it would soon be his turn to die; as early as 1947 he had written:

J'ai passé la cinquantaine. C'est dire que la mort ne doit pas avoir à faire bien longue route pour me rejoindre. La comédie est fort avancée.⁷³

Cocteau's intuition of his own death and his desire for a quiet funeral can be seen in a poem he wrote in Clair-Obscur which reads:

⁷⁰Clément Borgal, Cocteau: Dieu, la mort, la poésie (Paris, 1968), pp. 188-189.

⁷¹See also pp 7, 70 and 128.

⁷²Clément Borgal, Cocteau: Dieu, la mort, la poésie, p. 188.

⁷³La Difficulté d'être, p. 11.

De grace épargnez-moi les éloges funèbres
 De louer mes amis qui deviennent célèbres
 Leur cortège m'a précédé
 Proche est le temps de suivre et qu'un autre me loue
 Puisque le cornet noir encore un peu secoue
 Les quatre faces de mon dé.⁷⁴

Perhaps Cocteau had seen how Gide's and Giraudoux's wishes had been betrayed at their funerals. He had always disliked the idea of funereal pomp. His irreverent attitude was already apparent when, with Radiguet, he had left Proust's funeral cortège to eat a brioche before proceeding to the church. The oratory and pomp displayed at Giraudoux's funeral, in spite of Giraudoux's own wishes, had depressed him. He recounts his repulsion at this ceremony:

Rien de ce qui touche à la mort ne me dégoûte si ce n'est la pompe dont on l'escorte. Les obsèques me dérangent le souvenir. A celles de Jean Giraudoux je dis à Lestringuez: "Allons-nous-en. Il n'est pas venu."⁷⁵

Cocteau himself had requested a quiet funeral and burial in his garden at Milly. The latter request was refused and he was buried in the church grounds at Milly.

⁷⁴E. Sprigge and J.-J. Kihm, Jean Cocteau, l'homme et les miroirs, p. 346.

⁷⁵La Difficulté d'être, p. 144.

Visitors seeing Cocteau a short time before his death remarked upon the statue of the Virgin Mary and the crucifix in his room. Clément Borgal citing Julien Green's account of Cocteau's death in his Journal writes:

Jean Cocteau est mort l'autre jour. . . .Un de ses amis intimes me téléphone en larmes: Il m'avait dit: "Je suis chrétien, profondément chrétien, mais malheureusement pas pratiquant".⁷⁶

M. Jouhandeau also reported seeing the same religious items:

Un peu plus loin, sur une table ronde, on pouvait voir un crucifix, un livres d'heures, de l'eau bénite. . . .⁷⁷

Cocteau's religious views at the time of his death are uncertain. Certainly throughout his life, except for a short time under the influence of Maritain, he had never been a practising Catholic. On the other hand he had always insisted upon the religious nature of all art, had always rejected suicide, and had never attacked the Church. He certainly had a religion of his own but a conversion to Catholicism at the time of his death remains highly unlikely.

⁷⁶ Clément Borgal, Cocteau: Dieu, la mort, la poésie, pp. 192-193. It must, however, be borne in mind that Borgal and Green are both practising Catholics and may have perhaps exaggerated the importance of this remark.

⁷⁷ M. Jouhandeau, La Nouvelle Revue Française, Mort de Jean Cocteau (November 1st, 1963).

Cocteau speaks of his religious attitude in La Difficulté

d'être:

Plusieurs hommes ont dissipé ma crainte (de l'Eglise), parmi lesquels Jacques Maritain et Charles Henrion, car le respect qu'ils inspirent vous met l'âme à genoux. Mais ce qu'ils portent de singulier est aux ordres d'un pluriel, d'une règle étroite qu'ils illimitent, où notre confiance en eux nous entraîne, où les bornes apparaissent et emprisonnent de toutes parts. C'est en m'apercevant de cette manoeuvre à laquelle ils obéissent sans calcul que j'ai pris mes jambes à mon cou, aussi vite que faire se peut, et tourné casaque. Leur coeur, ma foi et ma bonne foi me restent.⁷⁸

It is apparent from the illustrations above of Cocteau's reactions and references to death in his own life that he was first and last a man totally involved in the artistic life of his time. He assimilated the deaths of artistic figures into his own works and paid tribute to fellow artists in commemorative articles and drawings. Cocteau had come to look upon artistic activity as one means of evading death.⁷⁹ His intense activity was to be seen in the last few months of his life; he worked on a film of the story of his whole career, corresponded with Grindea, the editor of Adam, and, in the last month of his life, only

⁷⁸La Difficulté d'être, pp. 45-46.

⁷⁹La fin du Potomak, O.C., II, 212: "Ecrire c'est tuer du vide, tuer de la mort".

regretted the fact that he was no longer able to write a single line of poetry.

Cocteau envisaged his final illness in dramatic terms; he wrote to Grindea on 17th June 1963:

Me voilà un peu moins faible, mais je me demande si je ne préfère pas le drame (de sa mort) à ces coulisses d'une convalescence où je cuve une orgie d'antibiotiques.⁸⁰

Cocteau saw his artistic creation as a channel of expression for his own deepest fears and preoccupations. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that his closeness to and his obsession with death appear time and again in his work and that this nearness to death is repeatedly expressed in his dramatic creations.

⁸⁰ Adam 300, an illustration facing p. 24.

CHAPTER II
DEATH AS DRAMATIC THEME

For Cocteau death is a process of revelation, a condition by which one rises to truth, for habit dulls man's awareness of his condition of death and allows him to live under an illusion:

C'est chaque fois la même farce et qui fonctionne toujours. Cet étonnement absurde et qui nous paralyse de stupeur vient sans doute de l'habitude que nous avons prise de ne pas admettre que la mort est notre état normal et de considérer l'état anormal de vivre comme une permanence.¹

Cocteau sees the poet's rôle in the theatre as one of dévoilement, of revealing the mystery hidden behind an everyday façade, and, therefore, as one of maintaining a balance between illusion and reality. Death as a theme is well suited to his ideas of a poésie de théâtre for the notion of death contains many inherent dramatic qualities which the poet can reveal through his techniques:

Chacun loge sa mort et se rassure par ce qu'il en invente, à savoir qu'elle est une figure allégorique n'apparaissant qu'au dernier acte.²

¹Jean Cocteau, Maalesh, pp. 9-10. See also p. 85.

²Jean Cocteau, La Difficulté d'être, p. 147.

Thus Cocteau reveals death as a continual companion for man but saves the appearance of death until the climax where it brings the whole drama into focus:

La mort éclaire un chef-d'oeuvre.³

In Cocteau's theatre man is depicted as living as if he were a free and autonomous being, for he fails to recognize the presence of the forces of death. Cocteau, by depicting the reality of these forces, shows that man is labouring under an illusion. Time is the notion which separates the living from the agents of death. Cocteau expresses this difference in concept in visual terms by the image of a pin-prick in a folded paper:

Passé, présent, avenir, n'existent que par un phénomène de pliage qui nous permet de prendre un contact extérieur et tout accidentel avec l'éternité dont le dessin intérieur, semblable à la guipure de papier faite par les ciseaux des illusionnistes, doit être d'une écoeurante monotonie.⁴

On stage this idea is expressed by Anubis:

Le temps des hommes est de l'éternité pliée. Pour nous, il n'existe pas. De sa naissance à sa mort la vie d'Oedipe s'étale, sous mes yeux, plate, avec sa suite d'épisodes.⁵

³Des beaux-arts considérés comme un assassinat, O.C.,
X, 201.

⁴Portraits-souvenir, O.C., XI, 85.

⁵La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 271.

Life for man, then, is a brief finite interval between two infinite stretches of death of which he remains ignorant because of his limited perception of things beyond his world; Anubis describes this restriction of man's:

Regardez les plis de cette étoffe. Pressez-les les uns contre les autres. Et maintenant, si vous traversez cette masse d'une épingle, si vous enlevez l'épingle, si vous lissez l'étoffe jusqu'à faire disparaître toute trace des anciens plis, pensez-vous qu'un nigaud de campagne puisse croire que les innombrables trous qui se répètent de distance en distance résultent d'un seul coup d'épingle?⁶

Life is almost an illusion in which man plays out his rôle:

--Nous avons, répondit Persicaire, un congé de quelques années du néant. Souffrez que j'en profite. Pourquoi des devoirs de vacances? Il sera toujours temps de reprendre mon uniforme de Rien. Je ne déteste pas (il se regardait tout nu dans la glace) mon costume fantaisie.⁷

Man, therefore, has only a concrete stretch of time to live which has been measured out by the gods.⁸ Abstract time is a fabrication of his imagination,⁹ an illusion to which he

⁶La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 270-271.

⁷Le Potomak, O.C., II, 124.

⁸See also pp. 83, 89 and 105.

⁹Abstract time is here referred to as that time which is measured by a clock; see also p. 107. Henri Bergson states in L'Evolution créatrice, chapter IV: "Le temps est invention ou il n'est rien du tout".

subjects himself, for his concept of time is a very limited one. The differences in the concepts of time establish man as a finite and ephemeral being and, as such, a choice victim for death. The forces of death are superior in that they are above man's concept of time and can afford to wait before showing their hand.

In La Machine infernale the vengeance of the gods is all the more terrible as they can afford to wait until their victim has reached the high point of his life before crushing him:

Pour que les dieux s'amusement beaucoup, il
importe que leur victime tombe de haut.¹⁰

Anubis tells the Sphinx that she will be present at Oedipe's and Jocaste's wedding-night and that other gods will watch Oedipe's final downfall seventeen years later.

Time ages man¹¹ and arouses in him a feeling of agony which Cocteau describes in La Difficulté d'être.¹² La Princesse in the film Orphée remarks on this fact that it must be an atrocious feeling to be subject to human time:

C'est la première fois que j'ai presque
la notion du temps. Ce doit être affreux,
pour les hommes, d'attendre. . . .¹³

¹⁰ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 190.

¹¹ See also pp. 15 and 102.

¹² See also p. 31.

¹³ Jean Cocteau, Orphée, Film (Paris, 1950), p. 106.

But in the realm of death all human considerations lose their importance as Jocaste learns:

Les choses qui paraissent abominables aux humains, si tu savais, de l'endroit où j'habite, si tu savais comme elles ont peu d'importance.¹⁴

Eurydice also sees the world of the living in a different light when she returns from death:

Le voyage d'où je reviens transforme la face du monde.¹⁵

Cocteau himself envisages three ways for man to rise above his condition of being subject to human time:

L'amitié occupe tout mon temps et si une oeuvre m'en distrait je la lui consacre. Elle (l'amitié) me sauve de cette angoisse que les hommes éprouvent à vieillir.¹⁶

Opium is also another method by which the concept of time may be transcended:

La vie et la mort restent aussi éloignées l'une de l'autre que le côté pile ou le côté face d'un sou, mais l'opium traverse le sou.¹⁷

¹⁴ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 340.

¹⁵ Orphée, O.C., V, 65.

¹⁶ La Difficulté d'être, p. 92.

¹⁷ Lettre à Jacques Maritain, O.C., IX, 281.

Just as man is a derisory being in the eyes of the gods because of his being subjected to time, so is he also alienated from his fellow men. Solitude in Cocteau's theatre is a common phenomenon and the individuals in whom the qualities of disorder, purity, poetry, liberty, illusion and angélisme are to be found are very lonely people. Thus Hans stands alone before organized religious belief, Antigone defies social order alone, Yvonne lives unwanted in the bourgeois household, Solange lives on the outside of provincial society, la Reine is isolated at court and Orphée becomes aware of the poet's solitude. It is in this solitude that the grandeur and beauty of tragedy lies. Tragedy demands heroes of exceptional calibre, as la Reine tells Stanislas:

Vous êtes une solitude en face d'une solitude.
Voilà tout. . . .C'est la beauté de la tragédie,
son intérêt humain et surhumain qu'elle ne
met en scène que des êtres vivant au-dessus
des lois.¹⁸

It is these solitary beings who brave the forces of death in Cocteau's theatre. Oedipe¹⁹ and Artus²⁰ attempt to brave life and admit to their situation; the

¹⁸Jean Cocteau, L'Aigle à deux têtes (Paris, 1968), p. 91.

¹⁹La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 330: "Je resterai donc tête à tête avec mon destin".

²⁰Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde, O.C., VI, 266: "Je suis seul en face de mes actes".

Other loners accept death as the final state of their condition. Antigone, Hans, Solange, Orphée and la Reine all will and bring about their own deaths. Solitude is thus conceived as a necessary condition for a tragic death. Just as these tragic heroes brave life alone, so do they face death alone. This sense of isolation is a reflection of man's being beyond all human help before death:

Sentant vaine, hélas, notre tendresse, il
[un ami de Cocteau] luttait seul contre
l'ange lourd qui, sur ceux qui vont mourir,
se couche à plat ventre.²¹

Yvonne had hoped that death would remove her from the solitude she had presaged for herself in life:

Je ne voulais pas . . . je vous voyais
tous, dans le coin. . . J'étais seule,
seule au monde. On m'avait oubliée.
J'ai voulu vous rendre service.²²

She realizes, when it is too late, that she must face death alone too.

The solitary hero also arises from Cocteau's concept of a poésie de théâtre. He tries to poetize his characters

²¹Le Potomak, O.C., II, 130.

²²Les Parents terribles, O.C., VII, 293.

by isolating them and by making them appear, not as familiar characters, but as having a displaced or a foreign air about them. Jocaste in dress, manner and speech belongs more to a Boulevard play than to classical tragedy. Hans is taken from his habitual environment and placed with high Church authorities. Stanislas is seen as an intruder in the royal apartments. Margot, in a bourgeois household, dresses up as Lucrezia in an effort to escape the banality of her life. This displacement of characters produces a feeling of uneasiness and reflects Cocteau's concept of the universe as a foreign and hostile environment for man, whose isolation is an important factor in the feeling of anguish and constriction in Cocteau's plays.

The solitary person, too, is well aware of his condition for he is not surrounded by social barriers. He is outside them and excluded by them. One of Cocteau's anecdotes illustrates this point:

Je connais un petit garçon qui demandait leur âge aux vieilles dames. C'était tantôt soixante-dix ans, tantôt quatre-vingts. Alors, disait-il, avec un oeil de glace, vous n'avez plus longtemps à vivre.

Une pareille grossièreté, qui passe par-dessus tous les fragiles édifices de la civilisation, n'étonne pas un solitaire. C'est avec la même candeur qu'il pense: Mon oeuvre vivra longtemps.²³

²³Le Secret professionnel, O.C., IX, 154-155.

Such solitary heroes are able to face the non-contingency of their situation and of death. On the other hand, other dramatic heroes of Cocteau's see death as an escape from their condition. Having lived a lie, they are confronted by the truth and prefer to evade it in death. Thus Jocaste, unable to face the reality of her incest, and Yvonne in Les Parents terribles, forced to face the truth of her love for Michel, commit suicide. Michel, like Oedipe, is the unwitting cause of the suicide of his mother, who loves him to excess. Yvonne, like Jocaste, is so shattered by the revelation of the reality of her situation that she prefers to die rather than to face the truth.

The lie may also be a fabrication of the character's imagination. When alive, Thomas's world of fantasy is for him, and for others too, a reality. Reality and the lie coincide at his death:

--Une balle, se dit-il. Je suis perdu si je ne fais pas semblant d'être mort.

Mais en lui, la fiction et la réalité ne formaient qu'un.

Guillaume Thomas était mort.²⁴

Like Thomas, Cocteau's mythomaniacs hope that death will crown their living legend, the illusory appearance that they

²⁴Thomas l'Imposteur, O.C., I, 184.

have given to their lives. The melodramatic rôle of la Reine in L'Aigle à deux têtes demands a tragic end:

C'est ma mort que je sauve. C'est ma mort que je cache. C'est ma mort que je réchauffe. C'est ma mort que je soigne. . . . Moi, je rêve de devenir une tragédie.²⁵

Death, for these liars, is thus the apotheosis and only solution to a life composed of lies when truth asserts itself. In Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde the deaths of Guenièvre and Lancelot remove the necessity for a lie and allow a painful reality to assert itself. As Galaad says to Artus:

Elle [la vérité] vous fera mal au réveil.²⁶

The lie thus leads to a state of sleep,²⁷ to a numbing of the awareness of reality. It provides a comforting evasion from the reality of a situation, as happened with Cocteau himself:

. . . j'arrivai à sortir l'ouvrage (Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde) du vague où je le tenais en marge, comme il nous arrive, malades, le matin, de prolonger nos rêves, de barboter entre chien et loup et d'inventer un monde intermédiaire²⁸ qui nous évite le choc de la réalité.²⁹

²⁵ L'Aigle à deux têtes, pp. 46-47.

²⁶ Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde, O.C., VI, 271.

²⁷ This state pervades Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde.

²⁸ This world of illusions attains physical dimensions in Les Enfants terribles where Paul's and Elisabeth's room is referred to as a "carapace", Les Enfants terribles, O.C., I, 211.

²⁹ Préface, Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde, O.C., VI, 120.

And part of the reality of man's situation is the inevitability of his death. Cocteau's liars hope to avoid this issue by choosing their own death but are, in fact, mistaken as to the freedom of this choice for, to assert itself, the truth must destroy a world of lies. The agents of truth, such as Galaad, Léo and Créon are all the harbingers of death to beings composed of lies. Even Oedipe in all his tragic grandeur wishes that he were able to block out painful reality:

Ah! si on pouvait se crever les oreilles,
je les crèverais. Je me fermerais. Je
me murerais. La nuit complète doit être
bonne.³⁰

Tirésias, during the course of the play, had helped maintain the lie by his silence.

The lie thus provides a comfortable wall between one's awareness of one's condition and reality. It is a refusal to believe in one's predestined death and provides the illusion of being in control of one's fate.

In Cocteau's theatre the young are the characters who most consistently live a lie. They are also death's favourite victims, as Cocteau noted on the occasion of Jean Le Roy's death:

³⁰ Oedipe Roi, O.C., V, 132.

De plus, Jean Le Roy était jeune, beau,
bon, brave, génial, pur, tout ce que
la mort aime.³¹

The young living at the intersection of childlike illusions and adult reality need a precarious balance and one slip means death. Life, for them, is possible only if the tension between the two states is maintained and if they differentiate between them. The Graal is a symbol of this precarious balance within the self:

. . .le Graal . . .qui n'est autre que
le très rare équilibre avec soi-même.³²

This idea of the young balancing between life and death is also to be found in a monologue, Par la fenêtre, and in a poem, Le Fils de l'air; the character in the monologue exclaims:

Regardez en l'air -- regardez comme je me
penche! Je dois me découper sur le ciel
et avoir l'air d'un ange.³³

In the poem the young boy cannot differentiate between illusion and reality and so dies:

Il se réveille, et croit que c'est un autre rêve!³⁴

³¹Préfaces, Cavalier de Frise par Jean Le Roy, O.C.,
X, 295. See also pp. 53 and 93.

³²Préface, Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde, O.C.,
VI, 122.

³³Jean Cocteau, Théâtre de poche (France, 1949),
pp. 127-128.

³⁴Le Fils de l'air, O.C., IV, 223.

Thomas, too, dies as he confuses these two states. Cocteau once described the novel, Thomas l'Imposteur, as a fall towards death:

On dirait, au ralenti, le trajet entre une fenêtre du cinquième étage et le trottoir.³⁵

By losing his balance on the tight-rope between dream and reality Thomas is killed:

Le filet, c'était le no man's land entre le ciel et la terre.³⁶

The young can, therefore, easily slip into death which is the only solution for those who cannot remain at the intersection of these two worlds and who cannot make the crossing from the idealism of youth into the compromising world of adults.

The young, too, by their very constitution are doomed to a short life, for they carry within themselves a susceptibility to beauty, love, poetry, purity, liberty and illusion, qualities which are all fated to bring death. The conflux of these qualities with death finds its dramatic expression in the figures of Roméo and Juliette, Antigone, Hémon, Hans and Stanislas, all of whom die young. Roger Lannes says that the death of the young is a favourite theme, too, in Cocteau's novels:

³⁵ Autour de Thomas l'Imposteur, O.C., IX, 231.

³⁶ Portraits-souvenir, O.C., XI, 45.

En ces trois héros (Jacques, Paul, Thomas)
 qui s'assassinent eux-mêmes, le poète
 incarne son fétichisme le plus intime:
 que la jeunesse est fatalement conduite
 à mourir de sa propre main.³⁷

It has just been noted that love is one of the
 qualities which is fated to bring death to the young. Love
 in Cocteau's universe is impossible to achieve in life for
 the lovers are always separated by some insurmountable
 barrier -- lies, incest, the presence of a third party or
 differences in class, age or nature. Death either becomes
 the only state possible for the union of the two lovers or
 the only solution to the removal of the barrier. J.-J. Kihm
 remarks upon this conflux of love and death in Cocteau's
 theatre:

Sa dramaturgie est un reflet de sa con-
 ception tragique de l'amour.³⁸

And again:

L'amour ne peut trouver d'accomplissement
 terrestre, il confine et mène à la mort. . . .
 Une disposition tragique vis-à-vis de
 l'amour pousse le poète à choisir ces sujets.
 Cette vérité pouvait encore se nommer la
difficulté de s'incarner.³⁹

³⁷Roger Lannes, Jean Cocteau (Paris, 1948), p. 63.
 See also p. 16.

³⁸Jean-Jacques Kihm, Cocteau (Paris, 1960), p. 91.

³⁹Ibid., p. 109.

The barrier of the lie is to be found in La Voix Humaine, Le menteur and Le Fantôme de Marseille. In this last monologue, for instance, Maxime's lie to M. Valmorel creates a deadlock; his accidental death reveals the lie and the woman's shooting of M. Valmorel puts an end to this lie.

The impossibility of love in life most often results from the presence of a third party. Lancelot and Guenièvre can only be married in heaven because of Artus's presence on earth; ironically it is Artus that makes this marriage possible. Elisabeth, the agent of death in Les Enfants terribles, allows no living person to enter into the imaginary world she shares with Paul. Agathe and Gérard are never fully accepted into their fantasy, Dargelos only as a result of his disappearance and Michaël only through his death:

Ni lui [Gérard], ni Michaël, ni personne au monde ne posséderait Elisabeth. L'amour lui révélait ce cercle incompréhensible qui l'isolait de l'amour et dont le viol coûtait la vie. Et même en admettant que Michaël eût possédé la vierge, jamais il n'aurait possédé le temple où il ne vivait que par sa mort.⁴⁰

Elisabeth finally preserves her possession of Paul in death, firstly by killing him and then herself.

Love may also appear as incompatible with social practice. Roméo and Juliette are kept apart by the feud

⁴⁰ Les Enfants terribles, O.C., I, 253.

between their respective families and it is only in death that they can be united. La Reine and Stanislas are separated by their social positions. It is only in death that they may attain love as is apparent in Stanislas's and La Reine's prayers:

Evitez à notre amour le contact du regard
des hommes. Mariez-nous dans le ciel.⁴¹

La Reine appears to be more in love with the idea of death than with Stanislas. At first she seems still to be in love with her dead husband and is initially attracted to Stanislas as the agent of her death. She sees herself and Stanislas as each other's victim and executioner, a relationship which is depicted by the two-headed eagle:

Je vous offre d'être, vous et moi, un aigle
à deux têtes. . . .⁴²

They fail to be totally united in death for their corpses are separated by the staircase.

Love is also made impossible in life because of an essential difference in nature or being. Thus la Bête is a monster and la Belle a woman, Renaud a man and Armide a fairy. Armide, putting love above immortality,⁴³ accepts

⁴¹L'Aigle à deux têtes, p. 102.

⁴²Ibid., p. 102.

⁴³Renaud et Armide, O.C., VI, 299: "Je ne veux sans amour être une de vos soeurs".

the condition of mortality in exchange for Renaud's love and thereby quickly succumbs to death. Likewise Orphée and Eurydice live in totally different spheres. Whereas Orphée is in contact with the supernatural world, Eurydice is firmly entrenched in everyday reality; their antagonism will only be broken by their reunion in death. In the film Orphée, love is impossible between mortals and the agents of death; La Princesse and Heurtebise inhabit the land of the dead, Orphée and Eurydice the land of the living.

Others among Cocteau's characters may prefer death to love. Antigone, for example, refuses the love of Hémon in life but is finally united with him in death:

Alors Hémon s'enfonce le fer dans le corps
et son coeur asperge Antigone. Ils
s'épousent là dans la mort et le sang
répandu.⁴⁴

Thomas and Hans, too, disregard the love of Henriette de Bormes and Christine respectively, both preferring death to love.

The irreciprocity of love may also result in the suicide of the spurned lover, as happens with Hémon, Henriette de Bormes, Yvonne, and the woman in Le Bel Indifférent.

⁴⁴Antigone, O.C., V, 177.

Death becomes their solution to a life without love.

Often times a blood relationship makes love impossible in life, as with Yvonne and Michel. In the cases of Paul and Elisabeth and Oedipe and Jocaste death makes this love possible by its purification. Jocaste's ghost, therefore, assumes the figure of the mother and not the wife, while Paul and Elisabeth enter a world which is above the ordinary moral order:

Encore quelques secondes de courage et ils aboutiront où les chairs se dissolvent, où les âmes s'épousent, où l'inceste ne rôde plus.⁴⁵

The human condition, therefore, does not allow for this purity of love. The lovers are fated to die as they cannot live oblivious to presence of reality. Reality is, therefore, seen as a constriction upon love and it is only in the realm of death that this love can triumph and be realized in all its purity. Pierre Dubourg states:

Et quand cette vie est décidément trop gênante pour la perfection d'un sentiment qui la dépasse, la mort bienheureuse recueillera Tristan et Nathalie, Yseult et Patrice.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Les Enfants terribles, O.C., I, 284.

⁴⁶Pierre Dubourg, Dramaturgie de Jean Cocteau (Paris, 1954), p. 187.

The love uniting Patrice and Nathalie is so spiritual and intense that it can only be realized in the world of essences and the temporal thus becomes fixed into eternity by their deaths.

The deadlocks created by these impossible love situations also give rise to a dramatic tension which increases during the course of the drama and which finally snaps in the climatic deaths.

As well as being the victims of love, the young in Cocteau's theatre are also destroyed by beauty which has a fatal aspect in Cocteau's works. He writes:

. . .la grande beauté balance toujours
entre la vie et la mort.⁴⁷

Beauty, as a theme, serves to initiate the action by dealing the first deadly blow. This is clearly visible in two of Cocteau's novels. The couple Mürren in Le Grand Ecart and the snowball thrown by Dargelos in Les Enfants terribles strike the first wound and Jacques and Paul are attracted, for the rest of their lives, to that beauty which will inevitably cause their deaths. Paul is attracted to the beauty of Dargelos, and then Agathe, because of her resemblance to him, strikes yet another deadly wound:

A peine évoquée, la ressemblance invisible (entre Agathe et Dargelos) qui n'attendait qu'un prétexte pour éclater, éclata. Gérard reconnut le profil funeste. Agathe, tournée

⁴⁷ Le Mystère laïc, O.C., X, 21.

vers Paul, brandissait la carte blanche
 et Paul, dans l'ombre pourpre, vit
 Dargelos brandissant la neige et reçut
 le même coup de poing.⁴⁸

It is the supernatural nature of Dargelos's beauty which draws Paul, a kind of beauty to which Cocteau refers as follows:

Le sexe surnaturel de la beauté.⁴⁹

It is only in death that Paul will ever be able to reach this beauty.

Jacques Forestier shares the same fatal susceptibility to beauty as Paul. Of him Cocteau writes:

Enfin, la beauté strictement physique
 affiche une façon arrogante d'être
 partout chez soi. Jacques, en exil,
 la convoite. Moins elle est aimable,
 plus elle l'émeut; son destin étant
 de s'y blesser toujours.⁵⁰

His attempted suicide is an expression of his extreme sensitivity and its ensuing solitude:

Jacques, trop seul, se jetait du train en
 marche. Ou bien, peut-être, ce scaphandrier
 qui étouffe dans le corps humain veut-il

⁴⁸ Les Enfants terribles, O.C., I, 241.

⁴⁹ Des beaux-arts considérés comme un assassinat, O.C., X, 213. The phrase occurs again in Le numéro Barbette, O.C., IX, 261.

⁵⁰ Le Grand Ecart, O.C., I, 14.

s'en dévêtir. Il cherche le signal
d'alarme.⁵¹

His heart is stifled by the ephemerality of beauty, especially
by that beauty which is a result of fashion:

Jacques se sentait redevenir sombre. Il
savait bien que pour vivre sur terre il
faut en suivre les modes et le coeur ne
s'y porte plus.⁵²

The impact of fashionable forms of beauty, which Cocteau
refers to as "beauté mineure", is immediate and doomed to a
very short existence:

La mode meurt jeune, et cet air condamné
qu'elle a, lui donne de la noblesse. Elle
ne peut compter sur une justice tardive, sur
des procès gagnés en appel, sur des remords.
C'est à l'instant où elle s'exprime qu'il
lui faut atteindre le but et convaincre.⁵³

The theatre, too, contains elements of this minor form
of beauty; the curtain falls after each performance as in an
execution⁵⁴ and the attendant spectacle in the auditorium all
forms part of a disappearing fashion. The theatre is,
therefore, a very apt place for representing the transient

⁵¹Le Grand Ecart, O.C., I, 88.

⁵²Ibid., p. 103. The rôle that beauty was to play in
Jacques's life had already been made apparent at the beginning
of the novel: "La mode meurt jeune. C'est ce qui fait sa
légèreté si grave. L'aplomb du succès et la mélancolie de
n'en plus avoir bientôt, magnifiaient cette danse. Toutes ces
notes devaient un jour trouer le coeur de Jacques.", ibid.,
p. 46.

⁵³Portraits-souvenir, O.C., XI, 60.

⁵⁴Le Foyer des artistes, O.C., XI, 373: ". . . le

nature of beauty, beauty which is fated to soon fade and die:

. . .cette beauté dangereuse qui marche sur la laideur comme l'acrobate sur la mort.⁵⁵

The room in Les Enfants terribles thus becomes a theatre:

Le théâtre de la chambre se donnait à onze heures du soir. Sauf le dimanche, il ne donnait pas de matinées.⁵⁶

In accordance with this fatal aspect of beauty, the agents of death may be presented on stage in the form of a beautiful young woman⁵⁷ and Cocteau also describes the beauty which survives death in feminine terms; he describes the ruins of the Pyramids and Sphinx as follows:

Une ruine est un accident ralenti. C'est pourquoi la lenteur du choc n'empêche pas la beauté morte d'avoir cet air de femme changée en statue, de vitesse devenue immobile, de bruit devenu silence, sans avoir eu le temps de faire ses préparatifs. La lenteur ne lui évite que les grimâces et les poses d'épouvantails des morts violentes.⁵⁸

Cocteau had noticed this same phenomenon while making sketches of his dead friends:

Je les touchais, je les admirais. Car la mort soigne ses statues. Elles les déride.⁵⁹

rideau rouge tombe, chaque soir, comme la guillotine".

⁵⁵ Eloge des Pléiades, O.C., X, 240.

⁵⁶ Les Enfants terribles, O.C., I, 229.

⁵⁷ See also pp. 93 and 100.

⁵⁸ Mon premier voyage, O.C., XI, 181.

⁵⁹ La Difficulté d'être, pp. 143-144.

It is also through death that an invisible spiritual beauty is transformed into a visible physical one. Both La Belle et la Bête and Renaud et Armide begin with one appearance and end with another. Juliette's beauty is also one of the reasons for Roméo's fatal love for her.

For Cocteau beauty is essentially a spiritual quality, a faithfulness to the pure disorder of the self in defiance of a rigid established order. Beauty is, therefore, seen in Cocteau's theatre as either something ephemeral which is quickly destroyed by time or as a force which sets the drama, terminated by death, in motion by upsetting the normal order and causing disorder.

Disorder may also be brought about by the refusal of Cocteau's dramatic heroes to sacrifice their purity to external pressures, a refusal which occasions their own destruction. Hans rejects organized spiritual authority just as Antigone does Créon's social order, Stanislas the order of a social hierarchy, and Yvonne the domestic order of Léo. Likewise Paul and Elisabeth resist all order outside the world of their room, Thomas the established class system and Jacques the normal order of beauty. Seen in this light, the theme of these three novels is the adolescent's tragic initiation and refusal to sacrifice his purity to the compromising and rational order of adults. Frederick Brown says with special reference to Romeo and Juliet

that this is a favourite theme of Cocteau's:

The theme of children foredoomed, their purity unable to survive outside its own playground, was eternally attractive to him.⁶⁰

Because the heroes' purity isolates them from and puts them beyond the pale of all moral and social order, they are persecuted⁶¹ for their nonconformity and die. Dargelos is one example of such a figure; Cocteau writes:

J'aimerais mieux qu'il (Dargelos) demeure . . . le premier symbole des forces sauvages qui nous habitent, que la machine sociale essaye de tuer en nous, et qui, par delà le bien et le mal, manoeuvrent les individus dont l'exemple nous console de vivre.⁶²

The destruction of such beings is thus self-willed and, directly or indirectly, self-inflicted, for these heroes prefer to die in order to maintain their purity rather than compromise it in life. Antigone says:

Devais-je donc, par crainte de la pensée d'un homme, désobéir à mes dieux? Je savais la mort au bout de mon acte. Je mourrai jeune; tant mieux. Le malheur était de laisser

⁶⁰ Frederick Brown, An Impersonation of Angels, a Biography of Jean Cocteau (New York, 1968), p. 259.

⁶¹ See also pp. 81 and 153.

⁶² Portraits-souvenir, O.C., XI, 71-72.

mon frère sans tombe. Le reste m'est
égal.⁶³

The hero is, therefore, committed only to his own spiritual purity which accounts for the lack of social or historical context in Cocteau's drama. Cocteau emphasizes, in Bacchus, the individual's purity rather than a dialectic problem:

La pièce ne plaide aucune cause. Elle montre seulement la terrible solitude des êtres jeunes qui ne s'engagent qu'en eux-mêmes et refusent d'épouser les directives d'une politique, quelle qu'elle soit.⁶⁴

The very nature of this purity implies a defiance and challenge of the established order:

Une chose permise ne peut pas être pure.⁶⁵

This purity is not easily justified but easily compromised:

La vie d'un homme pur ne doit être faite d'aucun acte qui puisse se légitimer sans effort devant les tribunaux, et les tribunaux ne valent jamais l'effort d'un homme pur. Un homme pur cesse de l'être dès qu'il combine, dès qu'il accepte une position favorable et profite d'un parti.⁶⁶

⁶³ Antigone, O.C., V, 156.

⁶⁴ Préface, Bacchus (Paris, 1952), pp. 9-10.

⁶⁵ Le Mystère laïc, O.C., X, 25.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

Purity by its very nature disrupts the habitual order and in the long run causes death, for death is the only shelter from further persecution and the ultimate refusal to compromise:

Un homme pur doit être libre et suspect
 Tout se tasse et se dénoue à longue. Le
 principal est d'être à l'abri (mort) à
 l'époque du dénouement.⁶⁷

Purity thus finds its expression in a reign of disorder and the retribution for this disorder is death by the forces of impure order. Thus the deaths of Hans, Antigone and Yvonne allow the forces of order to assert themselves at the end of the drama. These forces of order put an end to disorder; their destruction of the pure completes the fatal destiny of such creatures. These forces of destiny which bring about death are implacable and calculating in the hunting-down of their victims. La Voix in La Machine infernale invites the spectator to watch the harrowing torture of the drama:

—Regarde, spectateur, remontée à bloc, de telle sorte que le ressort se déroule avec lenteur tout le long d'une vie humaine, une des plus parfaites machines construites par les dieux infernaux pour l'anéantissement mathématique d'un mortel.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Des beaux-arts considérées comme un assassinat,
 O.C., X, 179.

⁶⁸ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 190.

Cocteau, therefore, depicts the world as a place of mischievous, even if tragic, game of hide-and-seek between the forces of fate and man, in which the gods allow man to act out his comedy until the time for the end of the performance draws near. Orphée remarks upon this situation:

Nous jouons à cache-cache avec les dieux.
Nous n'en savons rien, rien, rien.⁶⁹

It is only to a few privileged individuals that the forces on the other side of death decide to reveal themselves, for they must assume the visible forms which man associates with them. Orphée, for instance, does not recognize the young lady to whom he returns the gloves as Death. Oedipe, like the matron, does not associate the young lady at the pyramid with the Sphinx until she appears with wings. Renaud will not believe that the fairy he sees is Armide for she does not fit his preconceived idea of her. The supernatural forces will only wish to reveal themselves to man if they succumb to human sentiment. The Sphinx, la Princesse and Armide, for instance, fall in love with a mortal. This is one flaw in the infernal machine, that its agents may be subject to human feeling instead of being calculating and implacable. Once an agent ceases to regard man as a

⁶⁹ Orphée, O.C., V, 25.

pathetic and derisory being, he or she becomes weary of the rôle of dealing out death and seeks to turn man from his destiny. The Sphinx says:

J'en ai assez de tuer. J'en ai assez de
donner la mort.⁷⁰

Once this flaw in the machine appears, the higher agents of fate will appear, punish their servants and subject man to death. The agents of destiny who try to deter fate and collaborate with the living are punished, being already dead, with a fate worse than death; the punishment of Heurtebise and la Princesse is beyond all human imagination. The agents of death are all powerful in the eyes of men but in reality are themselves very vulnerable. The Sphinx is seen as just one cog in the infernal machine for she is powerless to deter Oedipe from his destiny; unwittingly she only pushes him nearer to it. Orphée, in the film Orphée, is astounded to learn of the vulnerability of the lower agents of death:

Orphée: Tu es toute-puissante.

La Princesse: A vos yeux. Chez nous, il
y a des figures innombrables
de la mort, des jeunes, des
vieilles qui reçoivent des ordres. . . .

Orphée: Et si tu désobéissais à ces ordres?
Ils ne peuvent pas te tuer. . . .
C'est toi qui tues. . . .

⁷⁰ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 238.

La Princesse: Ce qu'ils peuvent est pire. . . .⁷¹

The presence of the higher personnel in death's hierarchy is always felt, but rarely personified, on stage.⁷² Léo, as an agent of Yvonne's fate seems to be not totally responsible for her actions; she wonders:

Sait-on qui on aide? Sait-on de quels gestes on est capable lorsque le bateau coule?⁷³

La Princesse in the film Orphée describes the ultimate head of destiny:

Il n'habite nulle part. Les uns croient qu'il pense à nous, d'autres qu'il nous pense. D'autres qu'il dort et que nous sommes son rêve . . .son mauvais rêve.⁷⁴

The higher forces of destiny even protect their victims from other traps until the final curtain; they allow Oedipe to defy the Sphinx and Yvonne's first attempt at suicide to end in failure. There is no way that man can escape his destiny. He must either brave it, as does Oedipe, or connive with it and die.

Destiny may whisper hints between the initial event of the tragedy and the dénouement, for its presence is

⁷¹Orphée, Film, p. 82.

⁷²The higher forces of destiny are only seen at the end of Act II in La Machine infernale and in the trial scene in the film Orphée.

⁷³Les Parents terribles, O.C., VII, 236.

⁷⁴Orphée, Film, pp. 82-83.

continuous. The placing of destiny outside time accounts for the final victory of the forces of fate. Even the respite granted to Oedipe by the gods is a cunning device:

Dix-sept ans ont passé vite . . . car les dieux ont voulu, pour le fonctionnement de leur machine infernale, que toutes les malchances surgissent sous le déguisement de la chance.⁷⁵

It is upon man's ephemerality, then, that the forces of destiny prey. Man, in the eyes of these supernatural beings, is but their victim as Oriane remarks to Armide:

J'ai voulu vous montrer à vous, l'enchanteresse,
Un mortel dont notre art peut vous rendre maîtresse,
Une carcasse humaine et promise au tombeau.⁷⁶

The rôle of destiny or the forces of the supernatural in Cocteau's theatre, therefore, serves to embody man's inevitable destruction. Against such powerful forces man's resources are of little avail, for death is the price he must pay for his other privileges:

Les plantes payent ce privilège de ne pas mourir, par le supplice du faible espace qu'elles occupent, du statisme, de l'ankylose, de la privation d'une liberté (relative) de se mouvoir que l'homme possède et paye, fort cher, par la connaissance du petit espace à parcourir et par la mort.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 323.

⁷⁶ Renaud et Armide, O.C., VI, 298.

⁷⁷ La Difficulté d'être, p. 198.

Liberty is one of man's privileges and the liberty of Coctéau's dramatic characters may take two forms; firstly, a spontaneity of the emotions and of action, which results in a freedom from external order or constraint, and, secondly, a free-ranging of the iamgination outside the habitual rational order. The first expression of liberty results in disorder, the second in poetry and the living of a lie, all of which are accompanied by death. It is these manifestations of liberty which distinguish the hero from the norm, which make him the victim of both earthly and divine forces and which bring about his final destruction:

Oui, toujours on est suspect, on a l'air
drôle, dès qu'on se trouve engagé dans un
mécanisme qui diffère du mécanisme habituel.⁷⁸

The character, who proclaims the liberty to stand outside the habitual moral or rational order is, therefore, destined to die.

In Coctéau's theatre, too, man has the illusion of free-will and of liberty, for he can never avoid his final annihilation. The hero who asserts his liberty is taken to task by the forces of fate of which he remains ignorant. Oedipe, by fleeing Corinth, only moves nearer to his destiny and is unaware of the forces which he braves:

⁷⁸Mon premier voyage, O.C., XI, 215.

Sans le savoir, Oedipe est aux prises avec les forces qui nous surveillent de l'autre côté de la mort.⁷⁹

Oedipe, therefore, acts under the illusion that he is controlling his destiny. He fails to realize that his victory over the Sphinx, an agent of death and fate, is not a victory over destiny itself. He and Jocaste live on the threshold of awareness of their inceduous situation for the gods allow him to act out his rôle of liberty before showing their hand. Similarly la Reine in L'Aigle à deux têtes believes that she can command a death to match the melodramatic rôle she has created for herself in life. Events, however, happen outside her control, for she fails to take into account her love for her assassin and his suicide.

Cocteau's characters are always deceived at some level as to the freedom of their acts, a deception which occasions many instances of dramatic irony on stage.⁸⁰ This delusion is a result of man's ignorance of his total situation. Only a few chosen individuals at a few privileged moments have any intuition of death. Full knowledge of what is beyond life is impossible because of the two different concepts of time and because beings such as the poet, the free man, the pure and the young, are only able to communicate

⁷⁹Oedipe Roi, O.C., V, 103.

⁸⁰These instances will be examined further in Chapter III.

with the lowest ranks in the hierarchy of the powers of death. Renaud only guesses at the presence of Armide, Oedipe only sees the Sphinx but does not know that NÉMÉSIS and Anubis are watching him as he carries off the Sphinx's carcass, and Orphée only recognizes Heurtebise and not la Mort herself. Man has some inkling of his fate but total knowledge is denied him.

The characters may thus delude themselves as to the freedom of their acts. What they themselves have willed may coincide with external events of which they are ignorant. They live as if they were controlling their fate. The only assertion of freedom or the only escape from fatality is to live a lie, to deceive oneself and others as to the rôle one plays. Death by suicide in Cocteau's theatre, therefore, becomes the highest form of pretence, for the victim's will only concurs with an already determined event.⁸¹ LÉO had intended to remove Yvonne and Fred to hunt down Solange; it is also the will of the gods that Oedipe be pushed into incest with Jocaste.

These characters can only claim to be in control of

⁸¹Thomas's nobility, for instance, is made all the more authentic by his helping the bullet that kills him. Gérard Mourgue writes of Thomas: "Pour ne pas être aveugle, il fait l'aveugle; pour échapper à la mort, il fait le mort", La Table Ronde, no. 94 (October 1955). Cocteau also writes: "Le libre-arbitre était . . . la mesure dans laquelle on nous donnait l'illusion de pouvoir faire ceci ou cela". La fin du Potomak, O.C., II, 209.

their death. They assume responsibility for events which are beyond their control and, in this respect, are similar to the photographer of Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, for they share the same "motto":

Puisque ces mystères me dépassent, feignons
d'en être l'organisateur.⁸²

Cocteau thereby proclaims the vanity of all human action and the futility of man's death. His free-will is just an illusion, for his death is inevitable. Hans, Antigone and Orphée all die as a result of asserting their freedom. Oedipe is the only survivor, but his freedom is of ambiguous value as the gods, for their revenge, wished him to awake to and live in the full horror of his condition.

Cocteau envisages certain characters as being more likely than others to possess liberty. In his eyes the young, because they live in a world between reality and mystery, are part of a race of privileged angels, unable to survive for long in life and soon recalled to heaven.

Angélisme is the manifestation of the divine in human form:

Selon eux (les lecteurs) et selon nous (les poètes), l'ange se place juste entre l'humain et l'inhumain. C'est un jeune animal éclatant, charmant, vigoureux, qui passe du visible à l'invisible avec les puissants raccourcis d'un plongeur, le tonnerre d'ailes de mille pigeons sauvages.⁸³

⁸²Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 31.

⁸³Le Secret professionnel, O.C., IX, 175.

This idea finds its expression both in Cocteau's own life and in his artistic creation. In his Lettre à Jacques Maritain he writes:

J'ai perdu mes sept meilleurs amis. . . .
N'allez pas croire qu'il (Dieu) tuait de la
jeunesse; il costumait des anges. Une
maladie ou la guerre leur servait de prétexte
pour se dévêtir.⁸⁴

The notion appears in Cocteau's poetic novel, Le Grand Ecart:

Remonter, quitter le casque et le costume,
c'est le passage de la vie à la mort.⁸⁵

The external appearance of such angels is sometimes misleading for, in life, their costume is invisible. Jacques Forestier, for instance, is erroneously taken to be insensitive and witty.

Both the young and the poet have the qualities of angélisme, qualities which Cocteau describes in Le Secret professionnel:

Désintéressement, égoïsme, tendre pitié,
cruauté, souffrance des contacts, pureté
dans la débauche, mélange d'un goût violent
pour les plaisirs de la terre et de mépris
pour eux, amoralité naïve. . . .⁸⁶

It is this sensitivity and purity of such angels which makes them unsuited for this world and which accounts

⁸⁴ Lettre à Jacques Maritain, O.C., IX, 274.

⁸⁵ Le Grand Ecart, O.C., I, 13. Cocteau is here likening Jacques to an underwater diver.

⁸⁶ Le Secret professionnel, O.C., IX, 177.

for their deceptive appearance. This is apparent in the final sentences of Le Grand Ecart:

--Drôle de pays, murmura Jacques.
C'étaient les propres termes d'un ange
qui visite le monde et dissimule ses
ailes sous une housse de vitrier.⁸⁷
Il ajouta:
--Sous quel uniforme cacherai-je mon
coeur trop gros? Il paraîtra toujours.⁸⁸

On stage, however, the angel can appear in a recognizable visible form by wearing the costume of an angel but, even then, he has to dissimulate with the appearance of a glazier. In Orphée the concept of angélisme is personified in the figure of Heurtebise who appears as a glazier of no fixed abode; Eurydice, for a short time, believes that he belongs to her race rather than the race of mystery; she says:

Je vous croyais de ma race, vous êtes
de celle du cheval.⁸⁹

It is Heurtebise who guides Orphée into his own mysterious

⁸⁷This appearance will be noted again in Chapter III with respect to Heurtebise.

⁸⁸Le Grand Ecart, O.C., I, 103.

⁸⁹Orphée, O.C., V, 40.

world beyond life, who reveals to him the concepts of slow and fast time⁹⁰ and opens up the secrets of poetic creation. Because of his angelic wings Heurtebise can remain suspended between earth and heaven and, because of his insubstantial form, can show Orphée the doors to the world beyond life. His profession of glazier gives him the knowledge necessary to penetrate the mirror. He explains:

Vous savez, les miroirs, ça rentre un peu dans la vitre.⁹¹

It is because of this same transparent and brittle nature of his being that he suffers on earth:

Car c'est une race sur la terre; une race qui ne se retourne pas, qui ne souffre pas, qui n'aime pas, qui ne tombe pas malade; une race de diamant qui coupe la race des vitres.⁹²

As his insubstantiality and sensitivity make the angel so vulnerable, he is destined for a short life and soon returns to the land of the dead.

The angel may also be a dealer of death. Heurtebise initiates Orphée to the tragic destiny of a poet; Stanislas

⁹⁰This idea is more clearly expressed in Le Secret professionnel, O.C., IX, 175: "La vitesse du mouvement radieux qui le (l'ange) compose empêche de le voir. Si cette vitesse diminuait, sans doute apparîtrait-il".

⁹¹Orphée, O.C., V, 58.

⁹²Le Grand Ecart, O.C., I, 95.

or Azraël, the angel-poet, brings death to la Reine, and Oedipe's death is presented on stage in the form of an angel; the Prologue asks:

Mais quel est cet ange noir qui accompagne
Oedipe, qui lui bande et lui débände les
yeux?⁹³

The angel, therefore, may be both dealer and victim of death but he himself remains unaware of his rôle:

Beau spécimen de monstre sportif [l'angel],
la mort lui demeure incompréhensible. Il
étouffe les vivants et leur arrache l'âme
sans s'émouvoir.⁹⁴

The poet, too, possesses all the qualities of angélisme:

. . .voilà les signes de ce que nous
nommons l'angélisme et que possède tout
vrai poète, qu'il écrive, peigne, sculpte
ou chante.⁹⁵

His life is, therefore, a short one. The poet may die many different deaths before his final annihilation:

Le poète doit mourir plusieurs fois pour
naître.⁹⁶

⁹³ Oedipe Roi, O.C., V, 104.

⁹⁴ Le Secret professionnel, O.C., IX, 175.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 177.

⁹⁶ Orphée, Film, p. ii.

The creative process itself puts the poet in contact with the forces of the beyond by the death of his conscious self. Cocteau describes this poetic process in Prospectus:

A force de me meurtrir, . . . d'attendre
parfois des heures, seul, debout, ma lampe
éteinte, des parlementaires de l'inconnu,
me voilà quelque chose de tout à fait
machine, de tout à fait antenne, de tout
à fait Morse. Un stradivarius des baromètres.
Un diapason. Un bureau central des phénomènes.⁹⁷

In a similar fashion Orphée is receptive to the messages from the underground tapped out by the horse. In the film Orphée the radio replaces the horse. Orphée, however, by the suppression of his conscious self and by the descent into his inner being, succeeds in bringing back pieces from the beyond whether in the tangible form of Eurydice or in the form of a phrase such as "Madame Eurydice reviendra des enfers". The poet is able to wrench these incomplete forms away from death:

Ce cheval entre dans ma nuit et il en sort
comme un plongeur. Il en rapporte des
phrases . . . Je donnerais mes oeuvres
complètes pour une seule de ces petites
phrases où je m'écoute comme on écoute
la mer dans un coquillage . . . Je découvre
un monde. Je retourne ma peau. Je traque
l'inconnu.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Prospectus, O.C., II, 13.

⁹⁸ Orphée, O.C., V, 24.

Each act of poetic creation is also a rebirth for the poet. This is why Orphée enters his room to find his birth certificate. Art, for Cocteau, is a process of continuous questioning, exploration and discovery; to continue with one form of creation spells death to the creative process. Galaad is, therefore, forced to set out on new quests, and Orphée tells Heurtebise:

Ma vie commençait à se faisander, à être
à point, à puer la réussite et la mort.⁹⁹

The poet is inwardly compelled to seek contact with the forces of the world of the dead:

Ils [les anges] regrettent leur état primitif.
Ils cherchent à le rejoindre à tâtons et
l'Inconnu n'a cessé de les récupérer.¹⁰⁰

But the poet is punished for destroying the mystery and for coming close to an understanding of the powers of the beyond which will connive in the poet's destruction:

L'Inconnu n'aime pas les poètes. Il lutte
aussi contre les savants et les autres
artistes. Mais il redoute davantage les
poètes qui devinent et qui parlent. C'est
pourquoi beaucoup de poètes meurent jeunes.¹⁰¹

Even factors in life make the poet suspect and bring about his death. Orphée, for instance, is decapitated

⁹⁹ Orphée, O.C., V, 24.

¹⁰⁰ Préfaces, Cavalier de Frise par Jean le Roy,
O.C., X, 295.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 294-295.

by the Bacchantes; this persecution leads to his feeling of constriction within the real world and to his collaboration with his death:

La vie me taille, Heurtebise! . . . Il faut que
j'accepte, que je me tienne tranquille, que
je l'aide, que je collabore, que je
lui laisse finir son travail.¹⁰²

The poet, too, needs to be aware of the balance needed between the poetic and the real worlds:

Je me croyais devenir fou et je me consolais,
pensant que mes plus chers poètes une vitre
les sépare des fous, et que, si chez les fous
le fil a cassé, leur fil à eux en était à
son point de tension extrême avant de rompre.
Je savais que pour un rien la dissociation
cocasse du fou pourrait être émouvante et
pour un rien cocasse la dissociation émouvante
du poète.¹⁰³

Orphée, for instance, loses his balance¹⁰⁴ and sends Eurydice back to hell. He himself falls to his death:

J'ai dû tomber du balcon. J'ai dû tomber
de très haut, de très haut, très haut sur
la tête.¹⁰⁵

As well as submitting to this external destruction, the poet also allows his art to destroy him:

¹⁰² Orphée, O.C., V, 77.

¹⁰³ Le Potomak, O.C., II, 21-22.

¹⁰⁴ See also p. 113.

¹⁰⁵ Orphée, O.C., V, 79.

Il en résulte que mon oeuvre me mange, qu'elle commence à vivre et que je meurs.106

The poet's life is thus one of inevitable continuous torture and death:

Même si elle semble agréable, la vie d'un poète est chose atroce, elle se passe dans les supplices et il n'en peut éviter un.107

It is only in his final death, though, that his intuition of the beyond will be fully realized:

. . .seule la mort nous introduit totalement dans l'au-delà. Si le miroir est la porte de la mort quand elle veut pénétrer dans notre monde, il est vrai aussi que l'autre côté du miroir ne peut être atteint qu'en marchant derrière la mort.108

Poetry is thus one means of interrogating death for it is evoked from the world of the dead. Orphée's phrase is a beautiful but incomplete answer to its enigma:

. . .ce n'est pas une phrase. C'est un poème, un poème du rêve, une fleur du fond de la mort.109

The poetic world is also destroyed by logical examination, for the secrets of death can only be grasped partially and intuitively:

¹⁰⁶ Opium, O.C., X, 93.

¹⁰⁷ Secrets de beauté, O.C., X, 346.

¹⁰⁸ Jean Cocteau, Les Choses de l'infini, La Table Ronde, no 85 (January 1955).

¹⁰⁹ Orphée, O.C., V, 25.

Seuls les poètes faisaient des découvertes.
De leurs initiatives, ils rapportaient
une herbe, un caillou.¹¹⁰

This divorce between the poetic and logical or rational worlds is apparent in the final scenes of Orphée where the Commissaire and Greffier flounder in and are nonplussed by Orphée's poetic domain.

The poet is able to communicate with death through his poetic creation, for poetry is born out of a feeling of uneasiness in life:

Le confort tue. L'inconfort crée.
Je parle de l'inconfort matériel et
spirituel.¹¹¹

The poet, therefore, carries his own death within himself and is also a victim to external destruction. Because of his greater sensitivity and awareness, his situation is more atrocious than the ordinary human condition.

Cocteau recurrently refers to the inevitable presence of death at the beginning and end of every life:

Depuis le jour de ma naissance, ma mort s'est
mise en marche. Elle marche à ma rencontre,
sans se presser. Nos zigzags sont bien

¹¹⁰ La fin du Potomak, O.C., II, 249.

¹¹¹ Le Mystère laïc, O.C., X, 63.

inutiles. Elle marche en ligne droite et sa route les coupe toujours.¹¹²

Life is but a direct fall into death:

Vivre est une chute horizontale.¹¹³

It is also but an interval between two infinite periods of death:

Ces deux myopes (Fournier et Radiguet) qui sortaient à peine de la mort et y rentrèrent bien vite. . . .¹¹⁴

Cocteau also mentions death as the common human lot:

Malgré la différence des classes, la vie nous emporte tous ensemble, à grande vitesse, dans un seul train, vers la mort.¹¹⁵

Cocteau's choice of dramatic material underlines this universality; the settings for his plays range from classical Greece, to modern French provincial society, and there are signs that there are more instruments available for the awakening of anguish in modern man:

Le téléphone est devenu un instrument de supplice en plus.¹¹⁶

Cocteau's theatre is a testimony to this feeling

¹¹²La fin du Potomak, O.C., II, 234.

¹¹³Opium, O.C., X, 63.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 121.

¹¹⁵Le Grand Ecart, O.C., I, 88.

¹¹⁶Théâtre de poche, Le Bel Indifférent, p. 79.

of anguish. The Prologue in Oedipe Roi invites the audience to watch a torture not a drama:

Ce n'est pas une pièce de théâtre que vous
allez voir, mais un supplice, une cause
célèbre, un procès.¹¹⁷

Because of this uncomfortable awareness that death gives, most of Cocteau's dramatic heroes prefer a comforting illusion to an uneasy reality. Cocteau's portrayal of the universe as a hostile and dangerous machine designed for man's annihilation perhaps explains why his characters, for the most part, cannot face the noncontingency of their situation and live in a world of the imagination, seeking refuge from reality in flights of fancy. Cocteau, in this way, places a Romantic hero in a classical setting. His mythomaniacs and some of his young characters evade reality by creating a rôle for themselves in order to give their lives some purpose or importance or to provide a world more comforting than reality. The world created in this way is almost a complete casing from reality; Thomas, for instance, is only once threatened with the truth:

L'alcool soulevant un fragile couvercle de
réalité, il courut se plaindre chez sa tante.¹¹⁸

Cocteau sees this need for a delusion as something innate

¹¹⁷ Oedipe Roi, O.C., V, 104.

¹¹⁸ Thomas l'Imposteur, O.C., I, 142.

and often times necessary in man:

Il y a chez l'homme une sorte de fixatif, c'est-à-dire de sentiment absurde et plus fort que la raison, qui lui laisse entendre que ces enfants qui jouent sont une race de nains, au lieu d'être des ôte-toi de là que je m'y mette

Sans ce fixatif une vie parfaitement et continuellement consciente de sa vitesse deviendrait intolérable. Il permet au condamné à mort de dormir.¹¹⁹

Just as such characters achieve a heroic standing by fleeing from reality, so does Cocteau's theatre show that the man who braves the forces of death attains a tragic and exceptional gradeur:

Après les faux bonheurs, le roi va connaître le vrai malheur, le vrai sacre, qui fait, de ce roi de jeux de cartes entre les mains des dieux cruels, enfin, un homme.¹²⁰

Nevertheless in the eyes of the gods the stature attained is still a mortal one for man cannot avoid his final annihilation, as the Chorus says in the last lines of Oedipe Roi:

Thébains regardez cet Oedipe. Il devinait les énigmes. Il était roi. On l'aimait. Il n'enviait personne. Il s'écroule.

Ne dites jamais qu'un homme est heureux avant qu'il ne tourne sa dernière page.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Opium, O.C., X, 63.

¹²⁰ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 323.

¹²¹ Oedipe Roi, O.C., V, 135.

In Cocteau's theatre there is only Oedipe who will brave his condition and Artus who will try to face reality. In Cocteau's eyes only by facing one's condition with lucidity and by refusing to entrust oneself entirely to a comforting illusion is man on equal terms with his situation, as the Chorus states in Oedipe Roi:

L'homme et le néant se valent. Ton destin,
Oedipe, empêche d'envier aucun mortel. Tu
avais tiré la flèche plus loin que tous.¹²²

Any form of comfortable existence, Cocteau found, deadened the awareness of death and avoided reality. Greatness, he seems to say, is born only out of braving a situation:

Toutes les grandes races, toutes les grandes
époques: leurs danses répètent presque le
même geste mille fois. Personne n'oserait
s'ennuyer, s'en aller. Sens religieux de
l'art, sens de la mort. Le sens de la
mort est perdu. Jadis on mourait chaque
minute. Bien vivre, c'était bien mourir.
Aujourd'hui, on supprime la mort; on
l'escamote.¹²³

Cocteau himself was very lucid as to his own situation. His awareness of the presence of death made him try to circumvent his own condition by the taking of opium,

¹²² Oedipe Roi, O.C., V, 129.

¹²³ Des beaux-arts considérés comme un assassinat,
O.C., X, 201.

through artistic creation and friendship.¹²⁴ He did, however, recognize these activities as arising out of and as distracting from death; of opium he says:

. . .je préférerais un équilibre artificiel à pas d'équilibre du tout. Ce maquillage moral trompe plus qu'une mine défaite: il est humain, presque féminin, d'y avoir recours.¹²⁵

The sensation of slow speed and time stimulated by opium gave him the illusion of halting the progress of death:

. . .le sirop oriental nous gobe, nous arrête de vivre.¹²⁶

The sensation, however, is both illusionary and temporary; it is an evasion of one's condition of death:

Tout ce qu'on fait dans la vie, même l'amour, on le fait dans le train express qui roule vers la mort. Fumer l'opium, c'est quitter le train en marche; c'est s'occuper d'autre chose que de la vie, de la mort.¹²⁷

Cocteau sees all forms of activity as being an escape from the nearness of death:

. . .nous nous occupons et jouons aux cartes dans un express qui roule vers la mort.¹²⁸

His dramatic works testify to man's condition and to his feeling of agony and frustration for they themselves are

¹²⁴ See also p. 31.

¹²⁵ Opium, O.C., X, 55.

¹²⁶ Mon premier voyage, O.C., XI, 190.

¹²⁷ Opium, O.C., X, 67.

¹²⁸ La Difficulté d'être, p. 146.

born out of Cocteau's own awareness of and need to both face and evade the issue of death. Like opium, artistic creativity circumvents rather than triumphs over the condition of death; it is a distraction as Cocteau states in his Lettre aux Américains:

Les réflexions que je viens de vous faire . . .doivent s'entendre, de Michel-Ange au lapin mécanique, comme un hommage à l'adresse vertigineuse dépensée par mes semblables pour se distraire dans le train qui les emporte vers la mort.¹²⁹

Man's plastic expression of his art, however, survives time more so than does the artist; it is his claim to immortality:

Or, toute la noblesse de l'oeuvre dont parle Vasari vient de ce contre-ample, de cet acte de présence de l'artiste par lequel il s'affirme et s'écrie au travers des siècles: Ce cheval est un prétexte. Il m'empêche de mourir. Je suis là!¹³⁰

The form of this artistic creation matters little:

Créer: tuer autour de soi tout ce qui empêche de se projeter dans le temps par l'entremise d'une apparence quelconque, l'intérêt de cette apparence n'étant qu'un subterfuge pour se rendre visible après sa mort.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Jean Cocteau, Lettre aux Américains (Grasset, 1949, p. 17.

¹³⁰ Opium, O.C., X, 77.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 91.

A work of art in itself is in itself an incomplete answer to the problem of death; Cocteau saw the absurdity of creative activity for the victory is never final:

Un chef-d'oeuvre est une bataille gagnée
contre la mort.¹³²

Cocteau envisages the imagination as man's greatest faculty, as his most creative means of evading and equalling his death. He was aware of both the absurdity and human value in the survival of his artistic creativity:

L'homme qui crée tue sauvagement tout ce qui dérange un réflexe suprême de l'instinct de conservation.

Il en résulte des véhicules. Ces véhicules, après sa mort, continuent par machine, et restent capables d'écraser pas mal de monde. Lorsque les véhicules s'arrêtent, ils s'arrêtent dans une posture tragique de chose morte en marche, et c'est cette posture désespérée, cette angoisse désespérée de survivre, de continuer, de trouver le temps, de vaincre l'inerte, qui fait émouvantes certaines toiles anciennes.¹³³

Cocteau describes his own means of approaching and interrogating death in an article entitled Le Moine:

Avant d'atteindre une zone peuplée (elle se trouve peut-être à un millimètre de nous), avant d'entendre le bruit des premières

¹³² Coupures de presse, O.C., X, 365.

¹³³ Des beaux-arts considérés comme un assassinat, O.C., X, 173-174.

vagues, avant de connaître cette feuille de route -- la nôtre -- que les devins peuvent percer d'un seul coup d'épingle, déplier ensuite comme un éventail pour y voir les mille points, en face les uns des autres de cette pigûre unique devenir mille points de repère les uns à côté des autres, avant de tomber sur des dieux craignant d'autres dieux qui craignent aussi les leurs, il faut coûte que coûte atteindre nos anciennes limites par l'entremise d'appareils propres à épanouir nos sens amputés de longue date.¹³⁴

In this article Cocteau suggests that new art forms may help further this communication between life and death. This is one of his tenets of his poésie de théâtre, to awaken his audience to the mystery that is visible in the everyday world, for Cocteau sees the artist as a privileged person who, at times, is in contact with the supernatural. His belief that new art forms were needed in order to question death more closely accounts for the great diversity in his works and his many different experiments with new forms of expression. He would use any channel of communication which the modern media put at his disposal. It is this modernity of approach which underlines all his artistic doctrine:

Aujourd'hui, c'est notre effort de contradiction qui commence sa fin de course. Car la nouveauté . . . ne saurait être que la recherche d'une place fraîche sur l'oreiller. La place fraîche se réchauffe vite et la place chaude retrouve sa fraîcheur.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Quelques articles, O.C., X, 259.

¹³⁵ Préface, La Machine à écrire, O.C., VIII, 13.

As a result of his position as an artist living in an uncomfortable reality alone and continually interrogating death through his artistic creation, Cocteau believed that he was braving his condition of death. It is, therefore, not surprising that this awareness of the continual presence of death underlines all the themes present in his dramatic works.

CHAPTER III

DEATH AS DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE

Within Cocteau's theatre death is a common phenomenon and the highlight of the drama; only in Les Monstres sacrés is death absent from the action of the play. Some of the deaths in Cocteau's other plays are, of course, necessitated by Cocteau's adhering to the basic pattern of the original sources, as in Roméo et Juliette, Antigone, La Machine infernale and Oedipe Roi. It must, however, be borne in mind that these sources attracted Cocteau and were chosen by him for adaptation because their basic outline lent itself to assimilation into themes of his own universe.

The structure of Cocteau's theatrical works must be seen as arising out of artistic considerations. The working of the drama towards, and its culmination in, death is aesthetic and not ethic. Cocteau writes:

Le théâtre doit être une action et non point une bonne ou une mauvaise action. La France ne nous oblige plus à jouer au moraliste et la grande difficulté à vaincre doit être d'obtenir du style, sans aucune recherche de langue et sans perdre le naturel.¹

¹ Préface, Les Parents terribles, O.C., VII, 84.
This opinion is again stated in the preface to Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde.

Cocteau's dramatic works all develop towards the deaths of the main protagonists. Death is the apotheosis occurring either when two dramatic themes meet or when the one overrides the other. In L'Aigle à deux têtes the romantic death of la Reine is a fitting end to her melodramatic rôle in life, Orphée's death is a sign of his acceptance of the poet's fate, Yvonne's suicide is an expression of her disorder succumbing to the forces of order, and in La Machine infernale Jocaste the wife dies to be reincarnated as Jocaste the mother. The same structure is to be found in Cocteau's novels. In Thomas l'Imposteur Thomas's tomb will bear his assumed name of Thomas Guillaume de Fontenoy and in Les Enfants terribles the room of Paul and Elisabeth is preserved by their deaths. The climax of the drama occurs when the hero's own preoccupation, one theme in the drama, can only be realized through death. The whole development of the drama then works towards this fatal climax:

Tout se tasse et se dénoue à la longue.
Le principal est d'être à l'abri (mort)
à l'époque du dénouement.²

From this it is already apparent that death follows the direct confrontation and dramatic clash of two choices

²Des beaux-arts considérés comme un assassinat,
O.C., X, 179.

open to the hero, either to refute his obsession or to die. Because of the dramatic nature of this choice, death itself quickly follows this high point of dramatic interest. A short and specific analysis of two plays will make this structure even clearer.

The action of Antigone points towards Antigone's growing solitude and her inevitable death. After rejecting her sister's pleas and marriage with her lover, she defies Créon, a defiance which directly brings about her death. This dramatic confrontation with Créon is the high-light of the play. But Antigone prefers death to a compromise of her disorder and purity. In Bacchus Hans is a marked man from the initial manhunt until his death. After refusing Christine's love and the signing of the abjuration he considers himself a "condamné à mort".³ He accepts death in order to maintain his own truth and liberty. The self-willed victim of others, his masquerade as a mad man results in others choosing him as the king of the festival and the desire to testify to Hans's truth makes Lothar shoot him.

The play opens on an event or incident which disrupts the habitual order of things; it may be a message of

³Bacchus, p. 215.

five words from the underground as in Orphée, the end of an affair as in La Voix Humaine, the sleeping out of Michel in Les Parents terribles, the intrusion of Stanislas in L'Aigle à deux têtes, or the occasion of the village fête in Bacchus. The event need only be trivial or insignificant in itself but it is all that is needed to unleash the attendant forces of death, for the stepping out of an established order is in itself a challenge to the stability and authority of that order. The resulting punishment by death is, therefore, not so surprising. As Heurtebise says:

On n'écharpe pas un homme pour un mot.⁴

Once set in motion these forces relentlessly pursue the destruction of the individual with a calculating callousness.

This mathematical destruction is the reason why Cocteau refers to his drama as a supplice and it is most apparent in La Machine infernale, where la Voix at the beginning of the play invites the spectator to watch this tortuous process. The prologues to each act mark the stages in the process of this annihilation, which are presented in visual terms on stage.⁵ In Act I the warnings of Lafus's ghost remain unheard and unheeded and premonitions are given of the rôles the scarf and brooch are later to play. In Act II Oedipe's helplessness before the agents of death is

⁴Orphée, O.C., V, 74.

⁵See also pp. 83 and 119.

apparent when he is immobilized by the spell of the Sphinx, his pathetic smallness when the forms of Anubis and Némésis overshadow him as he triumphantly carries off the carcass of the Sphinx. Act III is built around the hints whispered by the forces of destiny as to the future destruction of Jocaste and Oedipe:

Ils dorment debout, et, malgré quelque
 signe d'intelligence et de politesse du
 destin, le sommeil les empêchera de voir
 la trappe qui se ferme sur eux pour toujours.⁶

In Act IV the trap rapidly closes in completely on them, realizations come quick and fast, Jocaste hangs herself and Oedipe is visibly crushed by the gods. The whole dramatic development, therefore, points towards these final destructions.

The time given to the individual to enjoy the illusion of his liberty and life has thus been carefully meted out by the forces of death.⁷ The drama occupies the time needed by the individual to play out the rôle he has created for himself in life. In L'Aigle à deux têtes, Bacchus, La Machine à écrire, Orphée, Antigone, La Machine infernale, and Les Parents terribles, the performance of the person destined to

⁶La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 281.

⁷See also pp. 29 and 105.

die in the rôle he has created for himself provides the basis of the dramatic action. The death of this character fixes his rôle forever. This function of death is also apparent in Cocteau's novel Thomas l'Imposteur; of Thomas's death Cocteau writes:

Elle (la guerre) s'arrête avec la mort de Guillaume qui est l'apothéose d'une féerie: le moment où la biche se change en princesse. Guillaume tué net, c'est l'enfant qui joue au cheval, devenu cheval.⁸

The rôle this central character decides to play determines the forces of death with which he clashes and his final choice between the rejecting of this rôle or death. A balance between dramatic characters and themes⁹ is, therefore, struck, and the tension created between them only released by the death of one of the main protagonists.^{9a}

The playing of a rôle also determines the choice of the victims of death; it results in the schizophrenics of Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde who are, at the same time, both "real" and "false", playing both themselves and the rôles of their fraudulent selves. At the deaths of Guenièvre

⁸ Autour de Thomas l'Imposteur, O.C., IX, 230.

⁹ This balance between themes and characters lends itself to a visual expression through the symmetrical positioning of characters and properties on stage.

^{9a} Cocteau saw that death could be a release in his own life. See also p. 21.

and of Lancelot the need for the lie or illusion disappears; the false self, as impersonated by Ginifer, then no longer exists. Death is, therefore, brought to a rôle of lies by an agent of truth, here in the form of Galaad.

More usually, however, the hero may cling so fiercely to his rôle that it attains the proportions of a myth. At an early age these mythomaniacs are the "enfants terribles" such as Thomas, Paul, and Elisabeth, because they live within the fabrications of their own fantasies and are oblivious to any exterior established order. When reality threatens their world, death keeps intact their make-believe. If great issues are at stake, or if these inner rôles are played later in life the mythomaniacs become the "monstres sacrés" of Yvonne, Antigone, and Hans. These figures seem so different to other people as to appear monstrous to them but they are sacred because they are pure in the preservation of their inner disorder. It is these qualities which bring about their final destruction, as is the case of the poet, rebel, and fanciful youth in Cocteau's theatre. Mythomania is itself a confusion of fantasy and reality and Cocteau maintained that life was only possible if a careful balance was maintained between these two states.

The fanciful or idealistic youth is the most consistent fugitive from reality. The years of youth, however, in which the young can play out their rôle and live by

their own truth, untouched by external reality and compromise, are brief; the performance is soon over, as la Reine remarks in L'Aigle à deux têtes:

Que la violence est courte! Tout retombe
et tout s'endort.¹⁰

The disorder it brings, although temporary, is dramatic and thereby provides effective theatrical material.

The play then ends after a series of precipitate twists, during which the hero believes that he is eluding his fate of death by constructing his own rôle, in death.

Suicide is the supreme form of illusion and the ultimate denial of reality in Cocteau's theatre and, in accordance with this, the final deaths most often take the form of suicide as in the cases of Jocaste, Roméo and Juliette, Yvonne, Solange, Elisabeth, Stanislas and Antigone. Often a willing complicity with death amounts to a virtual suicide as with Thomas, Orphée, Hans, Paul, la Reine, Armide and the Sphinx. The only deaths unsought by the victims are the murders of Lancelot and Guenièvre¹¹ and the accident

¹⁰L'Aigle à deux têtes, p. 51.

¹¹Here the murders of Lancelot and Guenièvre are necessary for the final dénouement, the assertion of truth and reality.

of Michaël.¹²

These deaths all have an element of spectacle or drama in their make-up. This theatrical nature of theirs provides an appropriate end to the playing out of a rôle and an apt climax to the clash of dramatic themes. In Les Parents terribles, for example, the tragedy revolves around the themes of order and disorder; in the Préface 1 to the play Cocteau writes:

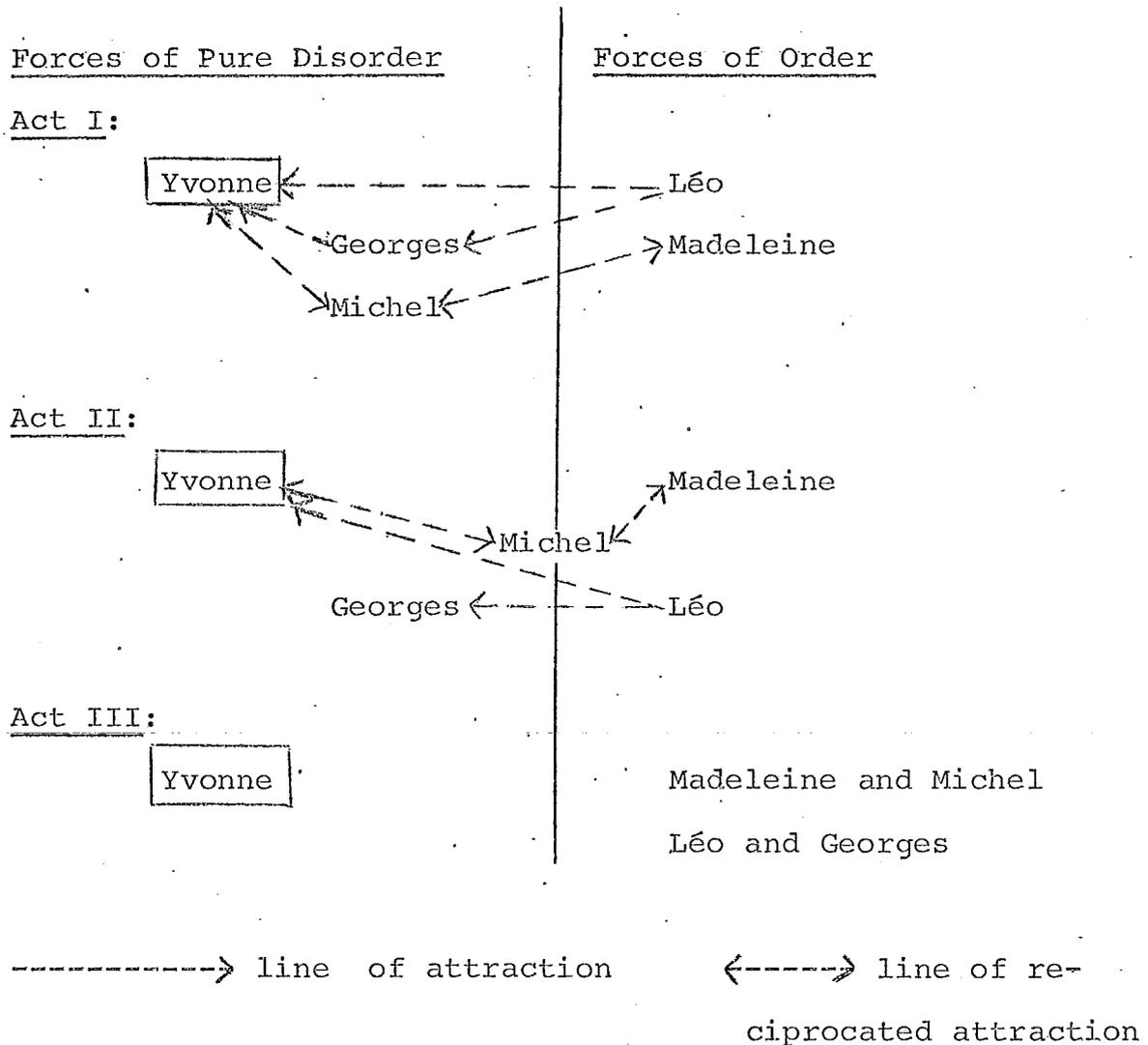
Deux rôles forment l'équilibre de l'ordre et du désordre qui motivent ma pièce. Le jeune homme dont le désordre est pur; sa tante dont l'ordre ne l'est pas.¹³

The play opens on a scene of disorder occasioned by Michel's sleeping out. It is then Léo who guides the action, continually confronting Yvonne with the truth of her situation, arranging the visit to Madeleine and organizing the events there as Georges has confided to her his liaison with Madeleine. Act I, therefore, prepares for the confrontation between the forces of order and disorder in Act II but, at the end of this act, Michel is still torn between the two forces. Act III marks the triumph of the forces of order; only Yvonne does not submit to this and,

¹² Michaël is destroyed as he threatens to bring reality into the chambre; only by his death is he able to enter the imaginary world of Paul and Elisabeth. See also p. 41.

¹³ Les Parents terribles, O.C., VII, 84.

unable to face her total solitude, commits suicide. The working of the drama towards the triumph of order and the isolation of Yvonne as she clings to her disorder may be represented diagrammatically:



Yvonne's suicide is then an active expression of her final solitude and of the theme of pure disorder being overruled by the theme of impure order. The struggle between these

two forces has provided the dramatic tension and balance throughout the play. And it is only by Yvonne's death that the balance and tension collapse to provide a dramatic finale.

Two of Cocteau's novels give clear examples of this structure. In Les Enfants terribles the snowball thrown by Dargelos strikes the first deadly blow and thereby initiates the tragedy; it is the black ball of poison sent later by the invisible Dargelos which signals the running out of time for Paul and Elisabeth in the playing out of their illusion and institutes the tragic end by which the children are able to defy reality and preserve their room of illusions. An opposition of dramatic themes and characters is attained through the forces on the inside of the room and those on the outside.

In Thomas l'Imposteur the imposture is begun as the result of a chance remark and reaches such proportions that, to Thomas, the war is but the scene set for his performance in his rôle:

La guerre, vue des coulisses, se trouve
décrite en raison d'eux (les personnages de
Thomas).¹⁴

¹⁴ Autour de Thomas l'Imposteur, O.C., IX, 230.

Thomas becomes more and more daring in his imposture, deliberately flirting with danger and death. His death provides him with an apotheosis to his legend and fixes his rôle completely and irrevocably. It is only by his death that he can achieve any heroic status, for Cocteau sees death as preserving both heroism and illusion:

L'héroïsme (l'acte héroïque) n'a de prolongement que par le mythe. Dire ce qu'on va faire, c'est ne plus le faire. Dire ce qu'on a fait, c'est ne plus l'avoir fait.¹⁵

Death is then the climax for Cocteau's dramatic heroes.

Because of the emphasis given to death by its situation in the drama, the victim belongs to a privileged and tragic élite of a very modern kind. It has already been noted that, for Cocteau, the young are the favourite victims of death.¹⁶ The youth who revolts against the rational order is viewed with suspicion by the members of that order, as Cocteau states in his allocution, D'un ordre considéré comme une anarchie:

La jeunesse aussi se cabre. Vous marchez seul sur une corde raide et chacun souhaite que vous vous rompiez le cou.¹⁷

¹⁵ Coupures de presse, O.C., X, 348.

¹⁶ See also p. 37.

¹⁷ D'un ordre considéré comme une anarchie, O.C., IX,

In accordance with this statement the young in Cocteau's artistic universe are the most consistent choice of tragic hero. Such potentially tragic young people are to be seen in the figures of Oedipe, Paul and Elisabeth, Roméo and Juliette, Antigone, Michel, Stanislas, Hans, Thomas and Jacques Forestier.

Cocteau is attracted towards youth as his central figures as the young inhabit the threshold of reality, hovering in the zone where the purity and fantasies of childhood and the rational order of adults merge into one. The confusion of reality and imagination, it has already been seen,¹⁸ results in a fall towards death. Le Grand Ecart is a clear illustration of the dangerous crossing between childhood fantasy and the assumption of adult order. Jacques, in order to be accepted into the world of adults, must accept their compromise; to do so would mean death to his own purity and love. He is left hovering precariously between these two worlds.

The dramatic point of interest occurs at the intersection of the realms of fact and fantasy which Cocteau attempts to reveal through his poésie de théâtre. The

¹⁸ See also pp. 38 and 39.

situation of Cocteau's dramatic heroes is thereby akin to that of the poet considered as a machine in contact with both these realms:

Il (le poète) ne doit avoir aucune peur
de la mort. Il doit être avec elle à tu
et à toi.¹⁹

This relationship is suggested further by the fact that Stanislas, Galaad, and Orphée are all poets; Oedipe and Renaud, too, are both in contact with the beyond. Cocteau's dramatic heroes are, therefore, an apt choice for his drama which unfolds in the zone between what is real and what is beyond the real, a notion which is fundamental to his whole concept of a poésie de théâtre, and which he describes in the film Orphée:

C'est une frange de la vie. Un no man's
land entre la vie et la mort.²⁰

The character who chooses to live in the zone between reality and fantasy is, therefore, placed in close contact with death.

The choice of an agent of death or fate is dependent upon the rôle or obsession of the young victim. The disorder and purity of Hans, Antigone, and Michel are offset

¹⁹Coupures de presse, O.C., X, 358. See also pp. 6 and 65.

²⁰Orphée, Film, p. xi.

by the respective order and impurity of the Cardinal, Créon and Léo, the rôles of Solange and la Reine by Fred and Stanislas. Death results as the agent of opposition asserts itself.

The formula of victim and agent of death is generally expressed by the choice of a man and a woman. If the victim is a young man, the agent of his death is an attractive, and frequently young woman. Such pairs are Orphée and la Mort, Orphée and la Princesse in the film Orphée, Oedipe and le Sphinx, Hans and Christine, Stanislas and la Reine. If the victim is a woman, the cause of her death is a man, more often than not a young man, as with Jocaste and Oedipe, la Reine and Stanislas, Armide and Renaud, Eurydice and Orphée, and Solange and Fred. Victim and agent of death even become one and the same, as in Roméo et Juliette and with Lancelot and Guenièvre in Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde. Victim and agent of death are thus inevitably and irresistibly drawn together. Sometimes a double pairing establishes the hero's attraction to and suspension between the real world and the world of death; Orphée is thus coupled with Eurydice and la Princesse, Oedipe with Jocaste and le Sphinx.

This coupling also results in an economic use of the central characters and a tight linkage of dramatic themes, producing a concentrated form of drama. Cocteau

only uses a large number of characters in his spectacle plays such as Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, Roméo et Juliette and Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde.

It is this constant tension between victim and agent of death and the conflicting themes which they embody that allow the continual threat of death to be felt. The drama develops by the opposition of these two forces, brings them to a climactic confrontation, and is resolved only by the death of one of the main protagonists. Consequently the presence of death is felt to be a powerful reality throughout the play and provides an underlying unity to the whole of the drama. This dramatic tension is only created through an opposition of themes and characters and by the fact that events quickly lead up to the final death. As la Reine explains:

Il faut assassiner vite et être lapidé par la foule. Sinon le drame retombe et tout ce qui retombe est affreux.²¹

Death in Cocteau's theatre then provides a dynamic presence throughout the whole of the drama and is an inevitable result of the interaction between dramatic themes and characters.

²¹ L'Aigle à deux têtes, p. 95.

The situation of death within the drama not only provides a dramatic climax but also reflects the classical elements of Cocteau's style. The techniques of representing death on stage and the linkage of death with other themes, however, is peculiar to Cocteau. Basically he is original in his adaptation and formulation of classical or traditional subject matter. The Boulevard elements²² in the relationships between Jocaste and Oedipe, Orphée and Eurydice, include Jocaste's sensuous nature, the innuendoes in the wedding night scene, the basic situation between Oedipe and Jocaste, and the bickerings between Orphée and Eurydice, and illustrate Cocteau's synthetic expression of old themes in new forms which distinguishes his theatre and which M. Beigbeder describes as follows:

. . . la théâtricalité de Cocteau et Dullin, tombée de mystique en technique, imbibe celle de Sardou, Flers et successeurs, et, dans une certaine mesure, réactualise le métier.²³

These techniques which Cocteau used to present death on stage and the effects he achieves through these techniques will now be examined.

²²The Théâtre du Boulevard with authors such as Tristan Bernard, Georges Courteline, Flers and Maurice Donnay, provided a superficial reflection of its time; its style depended upon a simple use of dialogue and its effects upon the stimulation of melodramatic sentiment..

²³M. Beigbeder, Le Théâtre en France depuis la libération (Paris, 1959), p. III.

It has already been noted that death is the result of an inevitable process towards destruction and serves to release the tension created by the torture of the drama. It may also produce a feeling of uneasiness within the characters or contribute an element of surprise to the drama, two functions of death which Cocteau expresses in Le Potomak:

Moi, dès heures, j'estime que la mort est la
seule certitude qui n'apporte aucune paix;
d'autres qu'elle est une récompense, la reine
des surprises d'ici-bas;²⁴

Cocteau does not present death as horrific²⁵ or for sensational purposes. Rather it is his unusual techniques of presenting death, and not the actual death itself, which shock:

Or, dans mon théâtre, je substitue les faits
au récit. Cette poésie active choque
toujours beaucoup.²⁶

Cocteau's use of language may also contribute to this element of shock. In La Machine infernale, for instance, the dialogue is a very contemporary one; the soldiers converse in their rough language and Jocaste teasingly calls

²⁴Le Potomak, O.C., II, 129.

²⁵It has already been noted in Chapter I that death was a familiar part of Cocteau's world and did not bring him any fear. See also p. 22.

²⁶La jeunesse et le scandale, O.C., IX, 343.

Tirésias "Zizi".²⁷

It is, however, this poetry in the form of active images, and not in lyrical language, which underlines Cocteau's whole concept of a poésie de théâtre which he sets out in his Préface de 1922 to Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel:

L'action de ma pièce est imagée tandis que le texte ne l'est pas. J'essaie donc de substituer une "poésie de théâtre" à la "poésie au théâtre". La poésie au théâtre est une dentelle délicate impossible à voir de loin. La poésie de théâtre serait une grosse dentelle; une dentelle en cordages, un navire sur la mer. Les Mariés peuvent avoir l'aspect terrible d'une goutte de poésie au microscope. Les scènes s'emboîtent comme les mots d'une poème.²⁸

This concept of a poetic action intensifying and forming the whole basis of the drama distinguishes Cocteau's poésie de théâtre from a poésie au théâtre. Other poetic dramatists, such as T. S. Eliot, Lorca and Christopher Fry, saw the theatre as an extension of poetic expression rather than poetry as fundamental to drama; the poetic qualities of their drama arise from poetry used as a verbal embellishment of the action and their originality stems from oral technical innovations such as the introduction of ordinary prosaic words, of rhythms and styles of modern verse into the dramatic

²⁷ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 211.

²⁸ Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 14.

dialogue. These dramatists certainly heightened ways of dramatic expression but only in the field of language.

Cocteau, in contrast, saw the poet's rôle in the theatre in wider and more plastic terms;²⁹ it is this view which makes him stand out from other dramatic poets:

Le poète doit sortir objets et sentiments
de leur voiles et de leurs brumes, les
montrer soudain, si nus et si vite, que
l'homme a peine à les reconnaître. Ils
le frappent alors avec leur jeunesse,
comme s'ils n'étaient jamais devenus
des vieillards officiels.³⁰

For Cocteau, then, the poetic dramatist unveiled the mystery which is an inherent, but often hidden, part of everyday life:

. . .poésie et miracle de la vie quotidienne:
voilà ma pièce. . . .³¹

And again he affirms:

Dans notre spectacle, je réhabilite le lieu
commun. A moi de le présenter sous tel
angle qu'il retrouve ses vingt ans.³²

In the eyes of other poetic dramatists it was poetry which intensified everyday life and which turned the common-

²⁹Cocteau describes these as "dissociations d'idées en chair et en os", Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 12. Objects and characters may embody this poetry and express it in plastic terms. See also p. 161.

³⁰Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 12. See also p. 27.

³¹Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 13.

³²Ibid., p. 13.

place into something extraordinary; this produced a discrepancy between the characters' conversing in poetry and the reality of the modern situation in which they were placed and led to the insertion of a chorus or narrative passages to carry the poetry of the drama, or to the alternation of slices of poetry and prose, or to the heightening of prose to poetry only at intensely dramatic moments. These techniques severely restricted the poetic expression within the drama, unlike Cocteau's poésie de théâtre which conceived of the whole of a drama as an entire poem firmly rooted in both the real and imaginary worlds.

Cocteau's techniques of presenting his imagery of death in active terms are clearly visible in his myth plays. He adapted four Greek myths in all, Orphée, Oedipe Roi, Antigone and La Machine infernale. The deaths in all these plays follow the basic outline of the original sources but their treatment depends on their linkage with other dramatic themes and on Cocteau's innovatory techniques in the theatre. There is a sense in which even Oedipe's being crushed by the gods may be seen as an aesthetic death, for his ignominious end marks the destruction of his rebellion and his pride.³³

Orphée is Cocteau's first play in which his experi-

³³ Ismène says: ". . .notre père est mort dans la boue après s'être crevé les yeux pour expier ses crimes;". Oedipe Roi, O.C., V, 147.

mental techniques completely carry the dramatic content. The play is a dramatic metaphor in which Cocteau materializes his ideas on the mystery of death, especially of that death necessitated by poetic creation, as Cocteau states in his Préface de 1922 to Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel:

M. Bidou, plus au courant des recherches contemporaines, expliqua aux lecteurs des Débats, que ma pièce était une construction de l'esprit.³⁴

Cocteau also says of M. Bidou's perspicacity:

Lui seul devait aussi écrire d'Orphée que c'était une "méditation sur la mort".³⁵

Although death is the central theme of the play, la Mort only makes one appearance. Her entrance on stage surprises the audience for she appears through a mirror and is a beautiful³⁶ and sophisticated young woman:

La Mort est une jeune femme très belle en robe de bal rose vif et en manteau de fourrure. Cheveux, robe, manteau, souliers, gestes, démarche à la dernière mode. . . Sa blouse d'infirmière aussi doit être l'élégance même.^{36a}

This elegance is underlined by the fact that it was G. Chanel who designed the costumes for the 1926 production. The personification of death also adds an element of spectacle

³⁴ Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 14.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

³⁶ See also pp. 48 and 93. Coleridge in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner depicted his Life-in-death as a beautiful, but horrific, woman.

^{36a} Orphée, O.C., V, 14.

to the play, for death is the supreme surprise in Cocteau's eyes.³⁷ Furthermore, la Mort, in order to take her victims unawares, must approach them unnoticed and so assumes a form with which men do not associate her. This secret la Mort confides to Raphaël:

Il y a encore une semaine que vous pensiez que j'étais un squelette avec un suaire et une faux. Vous vous représentiez un croquemitaine, un épouvantail. . . . Si, si, si. Tous le croient. Mais, mon pauvre garçon, si j'étais comme les gens veulent me voir, ils me verraient. Et je dois entrer chez eux sans être vue.³⁸

This idea is put into action when Orphée does not recognize the person to whom he returns the gloves:

Ensuite, j'ai parlé avec une dame invisible.³⁹

Christian Bérard also gives the following reason for this portrayal of death; he says:

La Mort doit être la femme la plus élégante du monde puisqu'elle n'est occupée que d'elle-même.⁴⁰

³⁷ See also p. 96.

³⁸ Orphée, O.C., V, 47-48.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

⁴⁰ Maalesh, p. 16.

La Mort then becomes an exteriorized projection of the death which is in man. Because man is blind to the workings of death, he is ignorant as to its presence.

Heurtebise tells Orphée:

Du reste, regardez-vous toute votre vie dans une glace et vous verrez la Mort travailler comme des abeilles dans une ruche de verre.⁴¹

This is because the workings of death are apparent in the aging process; Eurydice is pleased that Orphée will not seek her wrinkles.⁴²

La Mort betrays her connections with another world by her gestures and speech. In a mortal environment she moves⁴³ and speaks⁴⁴ at a great pace as if she were acting in accordance with the human notion of time.⁴⁵ While she is executing her functions of death she has the slower actions of a sleep-walker and her hypnotic state makes her appear to be in the control of further forces of death. These ideas are presented in the most striking visual terms; the stage directions read:

⁴¹Orphée, O.C., V, 58.

⁴²Ibid., p. 65. See also p. 30.

⁴³"La Mort marche vite et s'arrête au milieu de la chambre." Orphée, O.C., V, 45.

⁴⁴"Elle parle vite, d'une voix sèche et distraite", ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁵See also p. 29.

Elle (la Mort) passe lentement son bras droit et sa main sur son front comme un somnambule qui se réveille, comme pour se sortir de l'hypnose.⁴⁶

She appears to be weary of her task, a weariness which is apparent in her movements:

La Mort s'appuie contre la table de droite.
Elle regarde le vide avec unè fatigue profonde.⁴⁷

Unlike le Sphinx, la Mort does not question her rôle of distributing death but is swayed by human feelings and allows Eurydice to return to Orphée.⁴⁸ During her brief appearance on stage, though, her quick actions make her appear very business-like. She appears to act blindly and capriciously; her blindness is portrayed on stage by her being blind-folded⁴⁹ and her caprice by her killing of the horse to please Raphaël. The hierarchy of the forces of death are represented visually on stage with Raphaël and Azraël^{49a} as the servants of la Mort. They both help her in the operation of death, their function being signified by their surgical costumes:

⁴⁶ Orphée, O.C., V, 52.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 52. See also p. 54.

⁴⁸ See also p. 54.

⁴⁹ La Mort asks: "Raphaël, voulez-vous avoir l'obligance de me bander les yeux avec ce mouchoir".
Orphée, O.C., V, 48.

^{49a} Their names suggest they are angels recalled to heaven. See also p. 108.

Ses aides ont l'uniforme, le masque de linge, les gants de caoutchouc des chirurgiens qui opèrent.⁵⁰

The operation of death is seen as a process of anaesthetization in which memory soon fades and the concepts of time and space lose all meaning; Raphaël, a new recruit in the service of la Mort, still has vague recollections of the mortal concepts of time⁵¹ and space⁵² which are totally foreign to Azraël who has been in the service of la Mort for several centuries. The relativity of these two concepts is apparent when la Mort is able to substitute a watch, borrowed from the audience, for her own timepiece. The operation of death has all the paraphernalia of a surgical operation. La Mort washes her hands, uses alcohol, puts on rubber gloves⁵³ and sets modern machinery in motion. Orphée, as he leaves the realm of death, has the same sensation as when coming round after an operation:

Il me semble que je sors d'une opération.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Orphée, O.C., V, 14.

⁵¹He asks: "S'ils courent, aurons-nous le temps de finir?", ibid., p. 49.

⁵²Again he asks: "Azraël, où est Eurydice?", ibid., p. 49.

⁵³See also pp. 108 and 156.

⁵⁴Orphée, O.C., V, 66. See also p. 158.

The cutting of the thread at the end of the operation has various associations. Firstly, it has surgical connotations; secondly, it is a visual expression of the soul's attachment to the body during life and its release at death, in this play in the form of a dove;⁵⁵ thirdly, it is a direct representation of the classical notion of the Parques, how man's time is measured out and cut at the moment of his death.

We have already noted⁵⁶ that la Mort speaks and moves quickly in the world of man. The different elements of the human and supernatural worlds are portrayed on stage, as is the journey between these two realms. The machine which la Mort uses to contact her victims has all the marks of a science fiction machine used to explore the fourth dimension. Azraël explains the workings of this machine:

La Mort, pour toucher les choses de la vie, traverse un élément qui les déforme et les déplace. Nos appareils lui permettent de les toucher où elle les voit, ce qui évite des calculs et une perte de temps considérable.⁵⁷

⁵⁵In his Notès de mise en scène Cocteau says: "Inutile de dire qu'il n'y a pas un seul symbole dans la pièce. Rien que du langage pauvre, du poème agi: Cette colombe est un lieu commun"; Orphée, O.C., V, 96.

⁵⁶See also p. 102.

⁵⁷Orphée, O.C., V, 49.

The idea of the passage of la Mort from one medium to another is seen in the fact that her two assistants carry two large, black and very elegant suitcases in which there is the machine. Changes in the stage lighting⁵⁸ also suggest the different element in which la Mort works. The watery light suggests the state of weightlessness in the beyond, just as the poet's dive into death is seen as an underwater exploration in Cocteau's film Le Sang d'un Poète.

Because of her inhabiting a different world, la Mort sees things differently from mortals, a notion which is depicted visually on stage:

Elle [la Mort] a de grands yeux bleus peints sur un loup.⁵⁹

The greatest differences between the supernatural and mortal worlds are to be found in the concepts of time and space, differences which are made apparent in a production

⁵⁸The stage notes read: "Après la réplique d'Heurtebise: 'Je le ramènerai, je vous le promets', la lumière baisse et devient laiteuse. Une fois fixée cette nouvelle lumière d'aquarium, la Mort entre". Orphée, O.C., V, 96.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 14. This technique can also be interpreted as a visual sign of the artist's contact with death and his ability to glimpse beyond reality. Cocteau said as much when he, together with Jean Marais, was photographed with eyes painted on his own eyelids. Cocteau's fascination with the beyond is thus apparent in how own life. This technique is also to be found in the film Orphée where the scenario reads: "La Mort d'Orphée au pied du lit, en gros plan, avec des yeux peints sur les paupières". Orphée, Film, p. 53.

of Orphée. Scene viii is enacted simultaneously with, but twice during, the period of Orphée's descent.⁶⁰ What is for the audience a split-second is time enough for Orphée's journey into the beyond. This depiction of time is explained by Heurtebise:

Long . . . pour vous. Pour nous, vous ne ferez guère qu'entrer et sortir.⁶¹

It is the machine of la Mort which enables her to transcend the notion of time:

Il [Azraël] change nos vitesses. Une heure pour moi doit être une minute pour eux (les mortels).⁶²

The concept of space is demonstrated on stage too. The world of death is depicted as being in some remote yet quickly reached place.⁶³ Heurtebise is capable of remaining suspended between these two worlds for he is a messenger from the beyond. This suspension betrays his allegiance to the forces of death and arouses Eurydice's suspicions; she says:

Vous êtes demeuré une bonne minute entre terre et ciel.⁶⁴

⁶⁰In the film Orphée human time is marked by close-ups of a clock telling six o'clock. Orphée, Film, pp. 70, 88, and 112.

⁶¹Orphée, O.C., V, 59.

⁶²Ibid., p. 50.

⁶³In the film Orphée, for instance, Orphée is driven to this zone, uninhabited by mortals, within a short space of time, an active demonstration of the image of the coin. See also p. 31.

⁶⁴Orphée, O.C., V, 39.

The barriers between these two elements Cocteau visualizes in the form of a mirror which becomes the doors to death, as Heurtebise explains to Orphée:

Les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles
la Mort va et vient.⁶⁵

On one side of the mirror is man who can only see the reflection of death at work inside him and who cannot traverse this barrier because of his substantial and heavy form.

Those already dead, however, may cross this barrier because of their oblivion to the concepts of time and space and because of their insubstantial form. The poet may also cross this barrier between the here-and-now and the beyond.

The poet is more than a man,⁶⁶ Cocteau believes, as he is gloved by heaven and his vocation is one of many deaths, a belief which Cocteau expresses in his Lettre à Jacques

Maritain:

Vous savez ce que je nomme "gants du ciel".
Le ciel pour nous toucher sans se salir met
parfois des gants. Raymond Radiguet était
un gant du ciel. Sa forme allait au ciel
comme un gant. Lorsque le ciel ôte sa main,
c'est la mort. Prendre cette mort pour une
mort véritable serait confondre un gant vide
avec une main coupée.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Orphée, O.C., V, 58.

⁶⁶ Heurtebise remarks: "Un poète est plus qu'un homme". Orphée, Film, p. 68.

⁶⁷ Lettre à Jacques Maritain, O.C., IX, 274-275.

Thus when Orphée, the poet, puts on the surgical gloves of la Mort, he is able to penetrate into the realm of death through the mirror. Part of the costume of death makes an insubstantial being of the poet; Heurtebise underlines the different elements of these two worlds:

Avec ces gants vous traverserez les miroirs
comme de l'eau.⁶⁸

The mirror itself is but a one-way window on death, an image seen in action when Orphée hammers on Heurtebise's window in an effort to reach Eurydice.⁶⁹ Heurtebise himself embodies Cocteau's concept of angélisme,⁷⁰ his appearance and trade being visible signs of the inner qualities necessary to this notion.

The action of the play is set in Orphée's room; it is in the poet's domain that the mystery of death partially reveals itself. The closeness of the poet's world to death is exposed in the stage setting for the nearness of the forces of the beyond give the place an eerie atmosphere; the décor notes read:

Malgré le ciel d'avril et sa lumière franche,
on devine ce salon cerné par des forces
mystérieuses. Même les objets familiers ont
un air suspect.⁷¹

⁶⁸Orphée, O.C., V, 58.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 55.

⁷⁰See also p. 62.

⁷¹Orphée, O.C., V, 15.

It is only when one is firmly entrenched in mystery that la Mort herself appears; the poet is thus in a privileged position to communicate with the forces of death, as Cocteau depicts in active terms on stage.

With each poetic descent into death, however, the poet can wrest away some small glimmer of truth for, as Heurtebise tells Orphée, la Mort is surprised when questioned in her own domain:

. . .votre démarche l'étonnera beaucoup.
Sans doute vous obtiendrez peu, mais vous
obtiendrez toujours quelque chose.⁷²

What Orphée takes from death is embodied in the form of Eurydice, who demonstrates the fact that the poet finds his creation troublesome and uncomfortable and that he himself can never fully face death, only reflect an image for others to see.

It is Heurtebise, an agent of death, who guides Orphée in his poetic creation and shows him that he was wrong to heed the message of the horse. Poetry can only be born from within the self and not received from outside as Cocteau clearly states in the film Orphée:

Les messages qui le dupent [Orphée] et
envoyés par Cégeste sortent de Cégeste et
non de l'au-delà.⁷³

⁷²Orphée, O.C., V, 57.

⁷³Orphée, Film, p. iii.

In the play it is the horse who tricks Orphée and is the cause of all his troubles. Unlike the free-flying Pegasus in classical mythology, the horse in Orphée is confined to his box, a confinement which reflects the sterility of Orphée's earlier concept of poetic creation. The death of the horse, signified by the drawing of a black curtain across its box,⁷⁴ occurs when Orphée is exploring the beyond and marks the turning point in Orphée's conception of poetry. Again it is Heurtebise who shows Orphée the secret of poetic creation to be a continual process of death and rebirth. Orphée's ignorance of this fact at the beginning of the play is portrayed in physical terms when he forgets his birth certificate.⁷⁵ He is, however, awakening to the fact that he must look to the beyond, to the death which he carries in his own inner self for his poetic inspiration; he tells Eurydice:

Je mets le soleil et la lune dans le même
sac. Il me reste la nuit. Et pas la nuit
des autres! Ma nuit.⁷⁶

It is Eurydice's death which is the final factor in Orphée's turning away from his old concepts. He descends into death, saving Eurydice out of love, a quality which Cocteau deemed

⁷⁴Orphée, O.C., V, 47 and 95.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 37.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 24.

to be an integral part of the poet's being. Orphée's return to the world and his bringing back of Eurydice mark his own poetic rebirth and creation in plastic terms.

His process of poetic investigation, although presented as being intuitive and incomplete, is seen on stage as being more successful than the logical approach of the Commissaire and the careful notation of the Greffier who are ridiculous in their floundering in this world of mystery. Orphée, at least, is able to seize something away from death. His simplicity in approach is reflected in the choice of costume which Cocteau describes as follows:

Orphée et Eurydice en tenues de campagne,
les plus simples, les plus invisibles.⁷⁷

Because the truth which emerges from this exploration is so disconcerting, the poet is persecuted and must accept this lot as an inevitable part of his condition. Orphée's arousal and final acceptance of the hostility towards him is depicted by his being stoned and decapitated by the Bacchantes. He walks out onto the balcony to meet his death and his calling of "Eurydice"⁷⁸ after his death is a sign that he still speaks through his artistic work. The final

⁷⁷ Orphée, O.C., V, 14.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 79.

scene in which Orphée and Eurydice are seen to be at ease with each other in paradise is a visual expression of the idea that only in death can the poet and his work be in harmony.

The main cause of Orphée's death is, however, his inability to maintain his balance between the imaginary and the real worlds. Firstly he falls into the poetic world, a fall which is seen as an image in action:

Elle (Eurydice revenue de la mort)
le tire, il perd l'équilibre.⁷⁹

He then falls into the harsh world of reality from the balcony.⁸⁰ The décor, Cocteau stresses, reinforces the idea that a precarious balance is needed between imagination and reality:

. . . ce décor est un décor utile où le moindre détail joue son rôle comme les appareils d'un numéro d'acrobates.⁸¹

The prologue, spoken by the same actor who takes the rôle of Orphée, also emphasizes the need of paying careful attention to this equilibrium:

⁷⁹ Orphée, O.C., V, 71.

⁸⁰ See also p. 67.

⁸¹ Orphée, O.C., V, 16.

. . . nous jouons très haut et sans filet de secours. Le moindre bruit intempestif risque de nous faire tuer, mes camarades et moi.⁸²

In La jeunesse et le scandale Cocteau declared that he had faithfully followed the outlines of the original Greek legend in his *Orphée*:

Je vous résume la légende, suivie pas à pas dans ma pièce.⁸³

His technique of presenting this legend, however, is an original synthesis of the old and new:

J'y ai jouté quelques personnages: l'ange Heurtebise, et la Mort traitée dans le style des mystères du moyen âge; un commissaire qu'il vous semblera bien avoir déjà rencontré je ne sais où, et un cheval blanc. . . .⁸⁴

The classical elements are apparent in the starkness of the set, effected by the lack of colour and the minimum number of stage properties which help to focus the attention on the dramatic action, in the presentation of the hostile forces as the Bacchantes, in the use of the prologue, and in the fact that all deaths and violence take place off-stage. Cocteau's innovations are seen in his depiction of Death as a sophisticated and beautiful young woman, in his

⁸²Orphée, O.C., V, 17.

⁸³La jeunesse et le scandale, O.C., IX, 345.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 345.

exploration of the fourth dimension of time, in the Boulevard bickerings between Orphée and Eurydice, and in the enacting of death as a surgical operation.

The action of Orphée as an image of the workings of death, especially of those deaths occasioned by poetic creation, is in accordance with Cocteau's theory of a poésie de théâtre. In Orphée Cocteau's notions of the death of the poet are visibly and physically transposed on stage throughout the whole of the dramatic action.

The manifestations of death in Oedipe Roi are closely related to the classical sources. The ancient Greek setting reflects the hostility of man's universe and the cruelty of the gods as the Prologue relates:

Emplacement idéal pour les dieux qui aiment
bâtir et poser des pièges.⁸⁵

The whole staging lends itself to the idea of a universe as a trap, designed for man's annihilation, which is complete by the end of the play:

Lorsque la vérité se devine, le mur du fond
s'approche peu à peu jusqu'à rejoindre
complètement le praticable sur la dernière
réplique de Jocaste.⁸⁶

This is a visual expression of Oedipe's being walled in. The whole setting only serves to emphasize the smallness of man whose ways Cocteau likens to those of insects:

⁸⁵ Oedipe Roi, O.C., V, 103.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 101. This is also an enactment of Cocteau's idea of a décor qui bouge.

. . . les moeurs ressemblent beaucoup à celles
d'insectes souterrains.⁸⁷

Similarly the growing brightness of the lighting reflects Oedipe's growing awareness of his situation and its harshness the enmity of the universe. Oedipe's flashes of insight into his situation and his blindness may also be transposed on stage in physical terms by an agent of death taking a blindfold on and off his eyes.⁸⁸ This presentation of the forces of death serves to increase Oedipe's tragic grandeur, for the audience sees the odds against which he is battling. All these techniques are a result of Cocteau's notions of the workings of the forces of death upon man's blindness being seen in action.

Cocteau's adaptation of Antigone follows Sophocles more closely than did his adaptation of Oedipe Roi for, in his version of the Antigone legend, he wished to reveal beauties hidden in the original text through his new techniques of staging; he says:

Peut-être mon expérience est-elle un moyen
de faire vivre les vieux chefs-d'oeuvre.⁸⁹

Here he does not exteriorize his images:

Naturellement, aucune figuration n'escorte
les personnages.⁹⁰

⁸⁷Oedipe Roi, O.C., V, 103.

⁸⁸See also p. 64.

⁸⁹Antigone, O.C., V, 139.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 143. The fatal qualities within man are seen in action.

Rather he allows the visual effects of the staging to suggest the mortality and smallness of man's nature:

L'ensemble évoquant un carnaval sordide
et royal, une famille d'insectes.⁹¹

The opening scene between Antigone and Ismène resumes the stages in Antigone's growing solitude -- the deaths of her father, mother and brothers. During the rapid and concentrated action of the play Antigone is seen to voluntarily increase her solitude and move nearer to her death by refusing the comfort and escapes offered to her by Ismène, Créon, and Hémon. She is constantly moving closer and closer to her doom:

. . .réduite, concentrée, décapée, l'oeuvre
brûlé les petites stations et roule vers le
dénouement comme un express.⁹²

Antigone's confrontation with the forces of order which condemn her to death is signified in physical terms; she and Créon are seen at loggerheads:

Antigone et Créon se parlent de tout près;
leurs fronts se touchent.⁹³

Similarly the contrast between Antigone's opposition to and Ismène's acceptance of order is presented visually and the

⁹¹Antigone, O.C., V, 143.

⁹²La jeunesse et le scandale, O.C., IX, 319. The portrayal through the action of the fatal qualities residing in man and the concentration of the drama arise out of Cocteau's poésie de théâtre. See also pp. 93 and 97.

⁹³Antigone, O.C., V, 157.

theme of the opposition between order and disorder, compromise and purity, established, at the very beginning of the play:

Le rideau se lève sur Antigone et Ismène
de face, immobiles l'une contre l'autre.⁹⁴

Cocteau's notion of love only being able to survive in death is graphically depicted by the fact that Antigone's tomb and nuptial chamber are one and the same. Her walking to this tomb alone accompanied only by a doleful march is another physical expression of her complete solitude.

The doom which began with Oedipe is seen as a continuous condition and the play ends with Créon's solitude, for both Hémon and Eurydice commit suicide in an attempt to transcend their solitariness.

The depiction of solitude is also an important factor in La Machine infernale. The whole structure of the play is designed to show the death-trap of the universe and la Voix at the beginning of each act remarks upon the development of Jocaste's growing solitude and of Oedipe's being crushed by the gods for his lone defiance of them. Jocaste cannot bear to face the ultimate truth of her situation and so leaves Oedipe to face his destiny alone, as Oedipe himself remarks.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Antigone, O.C., V, 143.

⁹⁵ See also p. 32.

Jocaste's suicide marks her fleeing from reality and is the final expression of her own solitude for, as in the Ancient classical theatre, she dies alone and off-stage. Her solitude is even more complete than that of Cocteau's tragic lovers for Oedipe decides to live and not join her in death.

Oedipe himself is crushed by and forced to submit to the forces of death. The closing-in of the trap upon him is seen in the use of a moving stage-set, as in

Oedipe Roi:

L'estrade. . .semble cernée de murailles
qui grandissent.⁹⁶

The whole of the dramatic action thus works towards the victory of the powers of death over man, the battle for supremacy between the free man and the gods' ordaining of his destiny forming the balance of themes within the play. The supremacy of the gods is suggested throughout the mise en scène by a dramatic irony which allows stages in the closing-in of the trap upon Oedipe and Jocaste to be seen.

La Voix at the beginning of Act III remarks:

Ils [Oedipe et Jocaste] dorment debout, et, malgré quelque signe d'intelligence et de politesse du destin, le sommeil les empêchera de voir la trappe qui se ferme sur eux pour toujours.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 325.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 281.

These hints of destiny from the forces of death are apparent throughout the play and serve to bring out man's ignorance of his situation and the continuous presence of the gods. Such signs, the full implications of which escape Oedipe and Jocaste, include Jocaste's seeing the wounds on Oedipe's feet,⁹⁸ her hearing the beggar's song,⁹⁹ her rocking of¹⁰⁰ and placing of Oedipe's head upon¹⁰¹ the cradle, her attraction towards young men as seen in Act I, the distorted image of the workings of age upon her,¹⁰² the premonitions in her dreams before she even meets Oedipe,¹⁰³ the materialization of her dreams in Act III,¹⁰⁴ Oedipe's only being able to read the happy times in Tirésias's eyes before being blinded,¹⁰⁵ his always having dreamt of a maternal love¹⁰⁶ and the terms of affection, such as "mon

⁹⁸ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 312.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 319-321.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 321.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 319.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 321.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 309.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 295.

¹⁰⁶ Oedipe says: ". . . j'ai toujours rêvé d'un amour de ce genre, d'un amour presque maternel", ibid., p. 292.

garçon chéri"¹⁰⁷ and "ma petite mère chérie",¹⁰⁸ used by Jocaste and Oedipe on their wedding-night. In this hostile universe objects, too, have a fatal rôle to play in man's destruction. Very striking and original premonitions of the parts the brooch and scarf are given, the full significance of which eludes the characters themselves. In Act I, for instance, Jocaste tells Tirésias:

Crois-tu que je vais laisser à la maison
cette broche qui crève l'oeil de tout le
monde.¹⁰⁹

In Act III it is Tirésias who warns Oedipe of the rôle the brooch is to play in Act IV:

Beaucoup d'hommes naissent aveugles et ils
ne s'en aperçoivent que le jour où une bonne
vérité leur crève les yeux.¹¹⁰

Jocaste herself remarks upon her strangulation by the scarf:

Tout le jour cette écharpe m'étrangle.¹¹¹

All objects seem to connive in bringing about Jocaste's fatal

¹⁰⁷ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 286.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 311.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 228.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 278.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 209. See also p. 15.

end; she screams:

Et les escaliers me détestent. Les escaliers,
les agrafes, les écharpes. Oui! Oui! ils
me détestent! Ils veulent ma mort.¹¹²

The harsh lighting¹¹³ depicts the same cruelty of the universe towards man, just as the storm and lightning in Act I anticipate the disturbance which is to follow and portray the enmity of the elements. In the same way, in Act II, a sense of mystery and eeriness in the presence of the agents of death, similar to that in Orphée, is evoked by the moonlight and ruins. The redness of the nuptial chamber reflects the blood-relationship of Jocaste and Oedipe and anticipates the blood which is soon to flow.

Cocteau's techniques also consist in presenting in visual form his notions on the forces of death. The gods in order to be seen by man must assume the forms with which man associates them.¹¹⁴ The matron and Oedipe, therefore, do not connect the beautiful young girl with the Sphinx. Oedipe himself only recognizes her as the Sphinx when she assumes the winged and clawed form in which man conceives her. It is only the young child who has any inkling of the

¹¹² La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 229.

¹¹³ The stage notes read: ". . . les quatre actes baignent dans l'éclairage livide et fabuleux du mercure", ibid., p. 189.

¹¹⁴ See also p. 53.

young girl's real identity, an active projection of Cocteau's notion that only the simple may gleam any intuition of death, as Laïus's ghost remarks of the soldiers:

Ces simples savent-ils donc ce que les
prêtres ne devinent pas?¹¹⁵

The dead are also given physical dimensions in the forms of ghosts, which allows a certain communication between the living and the dead. Laïus's warnings, however, go unheard for Jocaste and Tirésias, in deliberately seeking to question this mystery, are unable to see the ghost, an active image of Cocteau's notion that mystery must come of its own accord to men. Orphée, too, makes this same mistake, as is apparent when he declares:

Je traque l'inconnu.¹¹⁶

Jocaste, after her death, is purified into the mother figure and her ghost is seen guiding the steps of her newly-found child. The notion of the purificatory powers of death are then here expressed in physical terms, just as Cocteau gives an active form to the continuous presence and relentless vengeance of the gods. Némésis and Anubis watch Oedipe carrying off the Sphinx's corpse.¹¹⁷ When Anubis rises to mock Oedipe in his dreams on his wedding-night,¹¹⁸ the

¹¹⁵ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 232. See also p. 112.

¹¹⁶ Orphée, O.C., V, 24.

¹¹⁷ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 278-280.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 309.

vengeance of the gods is seen to be continuous because Anubis had assured the Sphinx that she would be present on this occasion,¹¹⁹ and because the belt of the Sphinx is passed from a mysterious and beautiful young girl to Tirésias to give to Oedipe¹²⁰ that very night. Oedipe's being overshadowed by the gods at the end of Act II and his being spell-bound in the presence of the Sphinx reflect the pathetic insignificance and impotence of man when faced with the powers of death and excite pity in the gods; Némésis says:

Les pauvres, pauvres, pauvres hommes. . . .
Je n'en peux plus, Anubis. . . .J'étouffe.
Quittons la terre.¹²¹

It has already been noted in Chapter II that the supremacy of the gods arises from their not being subject to the concepts of time and space. On stage the concept of space is demonstrated by the gods' ability to leave the earth at the end of Act II, a departure which adds a spectacular touch to the play:

Une rumeur enveloppe les deux grandes formes.
Les voiles volent autour d'elles.¹²²

¹¹⁹ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 272.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 299.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 280.

¹²² Ibid., p. 280.

The concept of time is expressed by Act I occurring simultaneously with Act II. showing, as it were, the reverse and obverse sides of a coin,¹²³ a device which is reinforced by the repetition of the trumpet calls and cock crows and by the same back-cloth of the moon and stars, and described by la Voix:

Mêmes sonneries de trompettes, même lune,
mêmes étoiles, mêmes coqs.^{123a}

The depiction of the passage of seventeen years between Act III and Act IV is a theatrical convention; Oedipe has aged and displays the authority he has acquired during these years.

The concentration throughout the play of technical effects does not ever allow the dramatic tension to be relaxed and reflects the constant nerve-racking struggle between man and the gods. The techniques which he uses enable Cocteau to materialize his ideas on the interrelationship between man and the agents of his death in visual, aural, and active forms.

We pointed out earlier that the actions of Cocteau's plays all work towards the isolation of those who are to die and that the drama reaches its climax at the death of the

¹²³See also p. 31.

^{123a}La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 235. The notion is thus enforced through aural and visual techniques.

main character. In the myth plays the Eurydice in Orphée and Jocaste die alone in their rooms, Oedipe is left to face a living death alone, Orphée is separated from the crowd before which he dies, Eurydice in Oedipe Roi dies alone before the altar, Antigone dies alone in a pit, and Hémon in the same pit in a desperate attempt to leave his solitude and rejoin Antigone. The enclosed spaces in which these deaths occur gives a ~~physical~~ dimension to the characters' isolation and to the hostility of the world around them. The isolation of the characters off-stage is in the tradition of the classical drama where violence is not seen but reported by the chorus or a messenger. This isolation before death also reflects the classical notion of the tragic grandeur and pathos of man, a notion which is emphasized by the fact that these deaths, with the exception of Eurydice's, all amount to suicide. As in the classical tradition, too, there may be several deaths at the end of the drama. Antigone's death, closely followed by those of Hémon and Eurydice, is also represented as a repercussion of the tragedy of Oedipe. Also in accordance with classical tradition the unities of time, action and place are observed except in La Machine infernale. Cocteau's language and his presentation of ideas, though, reflect the modernity of his approach.

The meeting of the dramatic themes with death also

receives visual expression in these plays. The incompatibility of love with life is seen when Antigone hangs herself with her wedding veil in what is to be both her tomb and nuptial chamber, the inseparability of destiny with death when Jocaste hangs herself with the scarf which has given her warnings of the rôle it has to play, the martyrdom of the poet to his work when Orphée is killed as a result of a misunderstanding over his poetry. The deaths in these myth plays are then seen as the result of an inevitable process and express a release from the constraints of living.

In Cocteau's fantasy plays, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel and Le Boeuf sur le Toit, the elements of surprise and humour are the most interesting features. Death furnishes one important element of surprise and comedy by its presentation as an event outside the habitual rational order. In both these plays it is the person who threatens to destroy the make-believe atmosphere by refusing to accept any mystery in the everyday world who is killed. In Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel the general refers to the appearance of the lion as a mirage¹²⁴ and is devoured by the lion which then

¹²⁴Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 39.

returns into the camera. The general's death gives rise to some pompous funereal platitudes which is a delightful satire on the members of the wedding party. Such an aggressive character as the general, however, is so out of harmony with the world of the camera that he is regurgitated by it into the real world. Two changes, however, are apparent in him. After his experience he is much more modest and he walks with an uneven gait. His limp is a visual image of the poet's walking half in the world of reality, half in the world of the imagination. He literally has only one foot in the real world. His subdued demeanour is a result of his initiation to the world of mystery and his subjection to it. The camera in Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, like the mirror in Orphée, furnishes the doors to this realm. Like the mirror it sends back an image but has in addition artistic associations. Cocteau through this visual image is then able to suggest the proximity of art with death. In his re-entry into the camera the general is led by the child,¹²⁵ an active image of Cocteau's notion that simplic-

¹²⁵ Cocteau sees the child as being in close contact with the world of death and, therefore, able to perceive the mystery apparent in everyday world which he himself attempts to reveal in his poésie de théâtre. In his dedication of Orphée to Pitôeff Cocteau writes: "Ils (vos enfants) sortent neufs de la mort où les grandes personnes retournent. Ils se trouvent donc de plain-pied avec le mystère". Orphée, O.C., V, ll. See also pp. 122-123. The return to childhood and death reverses the aging process. See also pp. 48 and 102.

ity¹²⁶ is a necessary quality for penetrating the world of art and questioning death.

In Le Boeuf sur le Toit it is the policeman who puts an end to the fantastic events which take place within the bar. Because of his suspicious and rational approach to this fantasy he is decapitated by a rotating fan. His decapitation tends to suggest that his entirely mental approach was an inappropriate means of investigating the mysterious events, and the fan which decapitates him forms part of the décor qui bouge, which Cocteau also uses in La Machine infernale. Like Artus in Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde the policeman must pay at the end for his past error and this payment is absurdly enacted. The idea that a balance between the real and imaginary worlds must be found is suggested in active terms when the corpse tries to find its equilibrium:

Le corps mort cherche son équilibre.¹²⁷

The restoration of both the general and the policeman to life contributes to the light-hearted tone of these two plays and permits them to finish on a note of euphoria and humour, as well as adding to the visual effects of surprise and expressing Cocteau's notions of imagery in action and the manifestation of mystery in life.

¹²⁶ See also p. 112.

¹²⁷ Le Boeuf sur le Toit, O.C., VII, 312. See also p. 113.

In contrast with these fantasy plays death in Cocteau's two dramatic monologues is a very grim affair. La Voix Humaine¹²⁸ and Le Bel Indifférent both express the final anguish before her death of a woman whose love has been rejected. These monologues amount to the isolation and experimental exploitation in the techniques of the classical death speech. The lines of the two women give a résumé of the events leading up to the final crisis which is acted out on stage, the incoherence of the women's speech reflecting their intense stress.

In both these monologues, as in Les Parents terribles and the myth plays, it is the final isolation of the heroine which leads to her suicide. Here in the form of the dramatic monologue the isolation is virtually complete. When the woman's connection with the other is broken in La Voix Humaine she dies. In the modern world the telephone has become an object of death in the hostile universe.¹²⁹ Premonitions of the part the telephone has to play are apparent throughout the monologue; the woman says:

¹²⁸In La Voix Humaine the final word "Coupe" of the woman will be interpreted as meaning both "stab" and "cut the connection" for it is the telephone which is the instrument of her death.

¹²⁹See also p. 70.

Ce coup de téléphone devenait un vrai coup
que tu me donnais et je tombais, ou bien un
cou, un cou qu'on étrangle, . . .130

This premonition is actively strengthened when the woman
coils the cord around her neck:

Elle enroule le fil autour de son cou.¹³¹

Her death presumably occurs when her ex-lover cuts the
connection. This interpretation is supported by the décor
notes which read as follows:

Il (Cocteau) voudrait que l'actrice donnât
l'impression de saigner, de perdre son sang,
comme une bête qui boite, de terminer l'acte
dans une chambre pleine de sang.¹³²

The stage is set for the virtual murder which is to follow:

Le rideau découvre une chambre de meurtre.¹³³

The whole set as described by Cocteau reflects the harshness
of the action:

bref, une image d'aspect maléficieux.¹³⁴

¹³⁰La Voix Humaine, O.C., VII, 70.

¹³¹Ibid., p. 76.

¹³²Ibid., p. 58.

¹³³Ibid., p. 57.

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 57.

As in La Machine infernale the stage lighting reflects the cruelty of the woman's world:

. . .lampe envoyant une lumière cruelle.¹³⁵

And, on the set, the general appearance of disorder, as in Les Parents terribles, reflects the woman's inner disturbance and turmoil.

The woman's isolation in Le Bel Indifférent is marked in different stages -- her waiting for her lover to arrive, his indifference and silence towards her, his retreat behind the newspaper, and his falling asleep. It is only when he finally leaves the apartment that the woman realizes how complete her solitude is and runs towards the window.

Cocteau, therefore, in these monologues seizes upon the dramatic moments leading up to death and reveals the final solitude of the heroine in active terms, her seclusion in her room marking her isolation from others and from the outside world. Death follows the total isolation of the woman when her lover replaces the receiver or walks out.

The same notion of the impossibility to attain love within life is also to be found in Cocteau's love tragedies, namely Roméo et Juliette, Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde,

¹³⁵La Voix Humaine, O.C., VII, 57.

and Renaud et Armide. Although the theme of the realization of love only through death appears in other of Cocteau's plays, such as L'Aigle à deux têtes, Antigone, La Machine infernale, and Les Parents terribles, only the three plays to which this theme is central will be discussed here.

Roméo et Juliette is dependent upon its action, and not its language, for the dramatic imagery. Cocteau greatly condensed the lyrical passages and verbal images which are found in Shakespeare's text.¹³⁶ and, in his version, the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, resulting from and increasing the hostility between the Capulets and Montaignus, provide a visible expression of the ever-growing barrier which makes the love between Roméo and Juliette impossible in life. Similarly Roméo's vain attempts to prevent the fight between Mercutio and Tybalt reflect his impotence in this situation. When Mercutio falls, the stage directions read as follows:

¹³⁶ An example of this concentration is to be found in Romeo's description of Juliet. Shakespeare's text reads:

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
 Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear;
 Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!

 Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!
 For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

Romeo and Juliet (Oxford, 1947), p. 49. In Cocteau's text this speech is reduced to three short prosaic sentences; Roméo says: "Je n'avais jamais aimé. Un seul diamant orne l'oreille de la nuit, c'est elle. A quoi servent ces lustres ridicules?". Roméo et Juliette, O.C., VI, 37.

Mercutio est blessé. Un valet de scène entre mystérieusement et emporte son épée.137

The disappearance of the sword perhaps enacts Mercutio's earlier desire to avoid a fight with the Capulets, while the mystery surrounding its disappearance suggests that higher forces are at work separating Roméo from Juliette. It is Mercutio's death which sets the events leading to the final tragedy in motion. Roméo's entanglement and complicity with this feud is seen in a tableau when he kills Tybalt in revenge for Mercutio's death:

Tybalt tombe et en tombant empoigne la cheville de Roméo.138

Roméo must receive outside help in order to escape from this grip and flee from the scene:

Il (Benvolio) ouvre la main du mort pour libérer la jambe de Roméo.139

Roméo's gentleness is at odds with this aggressiveness, a difference which is denoted by Cocteau in physical terms in his gait:

Tous les jeunes gens élégants de Vérone auront une certaine démarche agressive, la main sur la garde de l'épée. Roméo seul ne suit pas cette mode et marche comme endormi.140

137 Roméo et Juliette, O.C., VI, 67.

138 Ibid., p. 69.

139 Ibid., p. 69.

140 Ibid., p. 20.

After Act III the attention is focused solely on Roméo and Juliette. Juliette feigns death in order to escape marriage with Paris, death not allowing this "love" to be realized, and her feigned death provides another of the drama's tableaux and is depicted to music:

Elle (Juliette) se couche. Sa main tombe lourdement au pied du lit.

Musique. Les valets de scène passent de gauche à droite avec une longue bande d'étoffe noire.¹⁴¹ Lorsqu'ils disparaissent, le fond étoilé de la fenêtre est devenu un fond matinal. Juliette est comme morte sur le lit, les mains jointes.¹⁴²

This technique is used again when Juliette joins Roméo in death:

Les valets de scène traversent le proscénium en tenant la longue bande d'étoffe. Puis ils sortent.¹⁴³

Cocteau calls such dramatic devices "trucs" and sees them as the essence of all dramatic art: he affirms with reference to the Tour du Monde:

Certes, mesdames, le truc c'est l'art.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹This technique may also be used in an alternative staging to Eurydice's final death in Orphée. Here the directions read: "Une fois l'obscurité complète on passe le bout d'une étoffe noire à Orphée qui se tient contre la porte de la chambre. Il tend l'étoffe jusqu'à la table, Eurydice se sauve derrière elle. On tire l'étoffe des coulisses d'un seul coup et en donne la lumière pleins feux. Toute cette manoeuvre s'exécute en un clin d'oeil". Orphée, O.C., V, 97.

¹⁴²Roméo et Juliette, O.C., VI, 97.

¹⁴³Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁴⁴Portraits-souvenir, O.C., XI, 41.

This technique also demonstrates Cocteau's ideas for renewing dramatic expression through the synthetic use of different art forms; in these tableaux he uses art and music.¹⁴⁵ The poetry of the play is, therefore, to be found, not in the language, but in the "trucs" or active images.

This technique of presenting the passage into death and the coming of night also involves the stage-hands and moving stage properties, devices used recurrently by Cocteau in his theatre and which are fundamental to his concept of drama. We have already noted Cocteau's notion of a décor qui bouge¹⁴⁶ and his use of the stage-hands in the actual production reflects his belief that drama should be a production of different artistic collaborations:

Une pièce de théâtre devrait être écrite, décorée, costumée, accompagnée de musique, jouée, dansée par un seul homme. Cet athlète complet n'existe pas. Il importe donc de remplacer l'individu par ce qui ressemble le plus à un individu: un groupe amical.¹⁴⁷

The play quickly ends after three more deaths, those of Paris, Roméo, and Juliette. Paris is killed by Roméo as he revives the family quarrel and Roméo denies him the right

¹⁴⁵In Roméo et Juliette Cocteau also uses a combination of ballet, mime, acrobatics, and optical illusion.

¹⁴⁶See also p. 129.

¹⁴⁷Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 17.

to lie in death with Juliette. It is on Juliette's catafalque that Roméo dies in his attempt to join her in death. His hesitation and questioning of whether Juliette is dead or not both add to the dramatic suspense. Juliette herself, to join Roméo in death, stabs herself:

Juliette prend le poignard de Roméo, se
 frappe et retombe sur le corps de Roméo. . . .
 On voit Roméo et Juliette couchés l'un près
 de l'autre sur la dalle.¹⁴⁸

Again the tableau is a visual image of the lovers' reunion in death, love being impossible during their life, and provides the focal point for the dramatic climax. The idea of the burial of lovers in a common tomb is a theatrical convention, but Cocteau presents it under a new tableau-like aspect. The sombre atmosphere of the whole play and the impending air of doom is reflected in the black costumes and décor. The black costumes are also the traditional dress for mime, the techniques of which Cocteau employs, and the indistinguishability of the actors from the décor may also be a visual representation of the notion that both are equally important, that both have a rôle to play in the drama.

¹⁴⁸ Roméo et Juliette, O.C., VI, 112.

The same tableau effect is used in Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde. Artus's killing of Lancelot and Guenièvre's subsequent death dispel the reason for the lie at Camaalot and are necessary for the return to reality from a state of sleep. As Guenièvre says:

Tout était désordre, tout était impossible.
Il fallait que cette chose arrive.¹⁴⁹

The reasons for this murder are given great credibility by Artus's suspicions being vocalized on stage and by Lancelot's entry on stage immediately afterwards. Lancelot is killed in Guenièvre's bed and Guenièvre receives the help of the fairies in joining him as he calls to her in death. Before the spectacle of her death Artus remains alone and spellbound. The marriage of Lancelot and Guenièvre in heaven is signified through the tableau, through their poses in Guenièvre's bed, which is at one and the same time their marriage-bed and death-bed, and through the voices of the fairies:

Lancelot du Lac, la reine est ta reine,
épouse la reine, la reine est à toi, la
reine est ta reine, Lancelot du Lac.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde, O.C., VI, 260. This return to life is actively portrayed by increasing the lighting, by allowing "sunlight" to flood into the room, and by the singing of birds.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 262.

The intervention of the foci of the beyond and the inability of love to express itself within life are thereby made apparent in the enactment of this marvellous spectacle.

Artus must then open the curtains to reveal the corpses to Ségramor and Blandine, who then retire into the alcove. The reincarnation of Lancelot and Guenièvre in the forms of Ségramor and Blandine adds an element of surprise to the drama and signifies the return to a new state of purity which is marked by the disappearance of Ségramor's wound and a return to a life free from lies.

The same atmosphere of unreality pervades Renaud et Armide. Renaud's divorce from reality and his imprisonment by love are signified throughout the play by the enclosed space of the garden in which all the action takes place; the paralysis of his will and inability to escape the charms of the garden are seen when he is immobilized in the presence of the fairies.

The impossibility of the realization of love between a mortal and a supernatural being¹⁵¹ is demonstrated through the action of the play. The initial inability of the two lovers to communicate because of their different states and their growing communion are enacted in Act I, Scene v, where Cocteau depicts man's intuition and questioning of the

¹⁵¹See also p. 42.

agents of the beyond. Renaud's human concept of the supernatural is visibly expressed when he refuses to believe that the woman who appears before him is, in fact, Armide, for she does not assume the form with which he had associated her. Similarly Armide's submission to the condition of mortality in order to gain Renaud's love is depicted in active terms when she gives up the ring which once was Orphée's.¹⁵² The impossibility of realizing this love in life receives its most dramatic expression when Armide dies as Renaud kisses her. She is again seen to be beyond Renaud's reach as he, uncomprehendingly, holds her, now dead, in his arms. These techniques of depicting the barrier which thwarts the love between Renaud and Armide all contain elements of spectacle which add to the fairy-tale atmosphere of the play as it unfolds on the threshold between the real and supernatural worlds. The staging of the play is then a very subtle and effective vehicle, in the graphic projection of the dramatic themes.

Cocteau's turning from experimental imaginative drama towards a more realistic type of theatre entailed a more traditional type of staging and acting. He wrote three plays which can readily be classed as Boulevard theatre, La Machine à écrire, Les Parents terribles and Les Monstres sacrés.¹⁵³

¹⁵²There is a sense in which Armide, by removing the ring, breaks her marriage with the supernatural.

¹⁵³In this study Les Monstres sacrés will not be

In these dramas the interest lies in the content rather than the scenic effects, for Cocteau is here writing with a definite moral purpose, as he himself declares in his preface to La Machine à écrire:

En écrivant Les Parents terribles, j'écrivais une tragédie, mais j'atteignais la masse par une attaque contre les désordres d'une bourgeoisie décadente.

Avec La Machine à écrire, une fausse intrigue policière me permet de peindre la terrible province féodale d'avant la débâcle, province dont les vices et l'hypocrisie poussent les uns à se défendre mal, les autres (la jeunesse romanesque) à devenir mythomanes.¹⁵⁴

There are, nevertheless, some very striking scenic effects. In Les Parents terribles the sets reflect Yvonne's disorder and Madeleine's order. The signs of disorder in the household are presented both aurally and visually; Yvonne's unmade bed is the most obvious visual sign of her disorder, while the slamming of the doors is an aural expression of the disturbances which Yvonne causes; Cocteau stresses these effects in his note to the play:

Les chambres seront celles de cette famille en désordre et de Madeleine (le contraire).

Une seul détail obligatoire: Les décors, très réalistes, seront construits assez solidement pour que les portes puissent claquer.¹⁵⁵

discussed as no death occurs in it.

¹⁵⁴ La Machine à écrire, O.C., VIII, 14.

¹⁵⁵ Les Parents terribles, O.C., VII, 88.

Similarly, Georges's and Michel's attraction towards Madeleine, an agent of the forces of order, is audible in their pronunciation of the word "in-cro-yable". Michel's preference for Madeleine's order is marked in physical terms as he kicks Yvonne's bed.¹⁵⁶

Yvonne's solitude is also depicted by her physical isolation on stage:

Pendant ce qui précède, Yvonne est restée seule, contre le mur, entre la porte du fond et l'angle de la pièce. Elle s'éloigne un peu vers la droite et, pendant ce qui va suivre, regagne lentement son lit où elle se couche.¹⁵⁷

Her unwillingness to face her solitude is apparent when, in a last desperate effort, she tries to recall Michel and Georges to her bedside.¹⁵⁸ Her being stifled by the forces of order is acted out; Léo actively prevents Madeleine and Michel from hearing Yvonne's final words¹⁵⁹ and George's complicity with this force of order is apparent when he, too, tries to silence Yvonne by his caresses.¹⁶⁰

Yvonne had, for most of her life, been ignorant as to the state of affairs in the household. It is only in

¹⁵⁶Les Parents terribles, O.C., VII, p. 273.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., p. 279. See also p. 88.

¹⁵⁸Yvonne screams: "Restez!, Restez! Georges! Mik! Mik! J'ai une peur atroce.". Les Parents terribles, O.C., VII, 285.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., p. 291.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 291.

Act III that she has any inkling of the real situations between Georges and Madeleine¹⁶¹ and between Georges and Léo.¹⁶² In one sense, then, she dies with her eyes open. She does, however, throughout her life, remain blind as to the nature of her love for Michel although her obsession with him is apparent in her frantic repetition of his name at her death.¹⁶³ Léo's order to Madeleine to close the eyes of the dead Yvonne¹⁶⁴ signifies that it is Léo who allows this deception on the part of Yvonne to be preserved, even in death, and reflects Léo's sympathy towards her. Madeleine's carrying out of Léo's order also lends itself to the interpretation that, had it not been for Madeleine's active influence upon the family, Léo would most probably not have been able to direct the course of events as she did. Madeleine's being instrumental to Yvonne's death, then, is here actively expressed. The play ends in a tableau which reflects the dramatic opposition between Yvonne and Léo and Léo's final victory:

¹⁶¹ Les Parents terribles, O.C., VII, pp. 253 and 257.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 259.

¹⁶³ Ibid., pp. 293-294.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 298.

. . . tous les personnages ont la tête cachée, sauf Yvonne étendue, et Léo debout, droite.¹⁶⁵

In the 1938 production of Les Parents terribles the ending was performed a little differently. There is no final tableau and Madeleine closes Yvonne's eyes on her own accord.¹⁶⁶ This ending suggests that it is Madeleine, and not Léo, who is the motivating force behind the drama. Whichever ending is used in production, however, the establishment of the forces of order is clearly defined.

Yvonne's desire to remain in darkness and her fleeing from the harsh light of reality is transposed, during the course of the play, into her desire and search for the shade.¹⁶⁷ In contrast to Yvonne's dark room, Madeleine's apartment, where the truth is brought to light, is very brightly lit. In Act III the assertion of order over disorder is reflected in the growing brightness:

On lèvera la lumière peu à peu comme il arrive lorsque l'oeil s'habitue dans le noir.¹⁶⁸

It is in these active images of the dramatic opposition between impure order and pure disorder, between solitude and company, and between blind illusion and harsh

¹⁶⁵ Les Parents terribles, O.C., VII, p. 298.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 300.

¹⁶⁷ Yvonne states: "J'aime l'obscurité.", ibid., p. 115.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 239.

truth, that the most important aural and visual effects of this play reside.

In La Machine à écrire, however, Cocteau's techniques of staging are subordinated to an implicate criticism of provincial society and to the production of an air of mystery and suspense. The play develops towards the unmasking of Solange by Fred and her suicide. Solange's living at Malemort is a physical expression of her being on the fringe of provincial society, while her surprise visit to Didier is an active depiction of her intrusion into the homes of its members; the scenes where she is left by Maxime and where she rejects Fred mark the stages of growth in her increasing solitude, the completeness of which is seen in her isolation off-stage at the time of her death. All the elements of the complex intrigue are dispelled by the revolver shot which provides a shock-ending to the drama.

The effect of provincial society upon the romantic young is reflected in the physical actions of Pascal, Margot, and Maxime. Pascal's disorder is apparent in his slamming of doors, Margot's mythomania in her playing of various rôles including that of the culprit, and Maxime's acting in his false confession and attack. Similarly Fred's silent and relentless pursuit of his victim is signified in his doggedly playing at cards despite the tumult around him.

In Les Parents terribles and La Machine à écrire

Cocteau hoped to revitalize the Théâtre du Boulevard by his social criticisms and by his infusion of grandeur into this genre; he expresses this desire in his preface to La Machine à écrire:

Puissé-je retrouver l'équilibre perdu entre la salle et la scène, écrire de grosses pièces subtiles et tenter les grands acteurs avec de grands rôles.¹⁶⁹

The staging of Yvonne's and Solange's suicides, the steps leading up to these events, and the use of objects on stage are close to the techniques used in the dramas of Ibsen and Chekhov. The rôle of Hedda Gabler, for instance, is a commanding one and her solitude becomes more and more complete during the course of the play up to the moment when she dies alone, as it were, off-stage and in a little room.¹⁷⁰ Here, as in Cocteau's theatre, the themes of love and the spiritual life are given an active projection. Hedda Gabler's burning of Løvborg's manuscript, for instance, visually reflects her desire to be a child-murderer rather than a literary vandal. This technique in Ibsen's theatre

¹⁶⁹ La Machine à écrire, O.C., VIII, 14.

¹⁷⁰ In his production of Hedda Gabler at the National Theatre in July 1970 Ingmar Bergman's most important innovation was the showing of Hedda Gabler's off-stage studio, a visual device which portrays her solitude more vividly and which gives her an aura of silence and introspection. The blood red set of curved screens suggested an enclosed purgatory. These two devices bring to mind Cocteau's staging techniques forty years earlier. See also pp. 155 and 156.

occurs to highlight the social aspects of the drama whereas, in Cocteau's theatre, they are essential to the unfolding of the whole of the dramatic action.

In Chekhov's theatre a place, such as a cherry orchard, or a piece of stage property, such as a stuffed seagull, correspond with the incidents of the action and emphasize the emotional atmosphere of the play. In The Seagull, for instance, the seagull reflects Treplef's losing of Nina to Trigorin and Trigorin's later indifference towards Nina; it is upon the seagull that the audience's attention is focused as Treplef shoots himself off-stage. In Chekhov's theatre the imagery is transposed onto an inanimate object but its expression is still largely dependent upon words, as the characters many references to the seagull show. In contrast Cocteau's images are seen in action during the course of his drama in accordance with his poésie de théâtre.

L'Aigle à deux têtes is a historical melodrama subtly presented through Cocteau's techniques of a poésie de théâtre, for the play unravels the shroud of mystery which surrounds an imaginary historical event; Cocteau says:

J'ai pensé . . . qu'il serait intéressant et propice au grand jeu du théâtre, d'inventer un fait divers historique de cet ordre et d'écrire ensuite une pièce pour en dévoiler le secret.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ L'Aigle à deux têtes, p. 5. This process of dévoilement was for Cocteau the essence of the poet's rôle in the theatre. See also p. 98.

In his preface Cocteau states his belief that the contemporary theatre could be revived through such a play infused with tragic grandeur; he writes:

Marier ces deux forces--la pièce humaine et le grand rôle--n'est-ce pas le moyen de sauver le théâtre et lui rendre son efficacité?¹⁷²

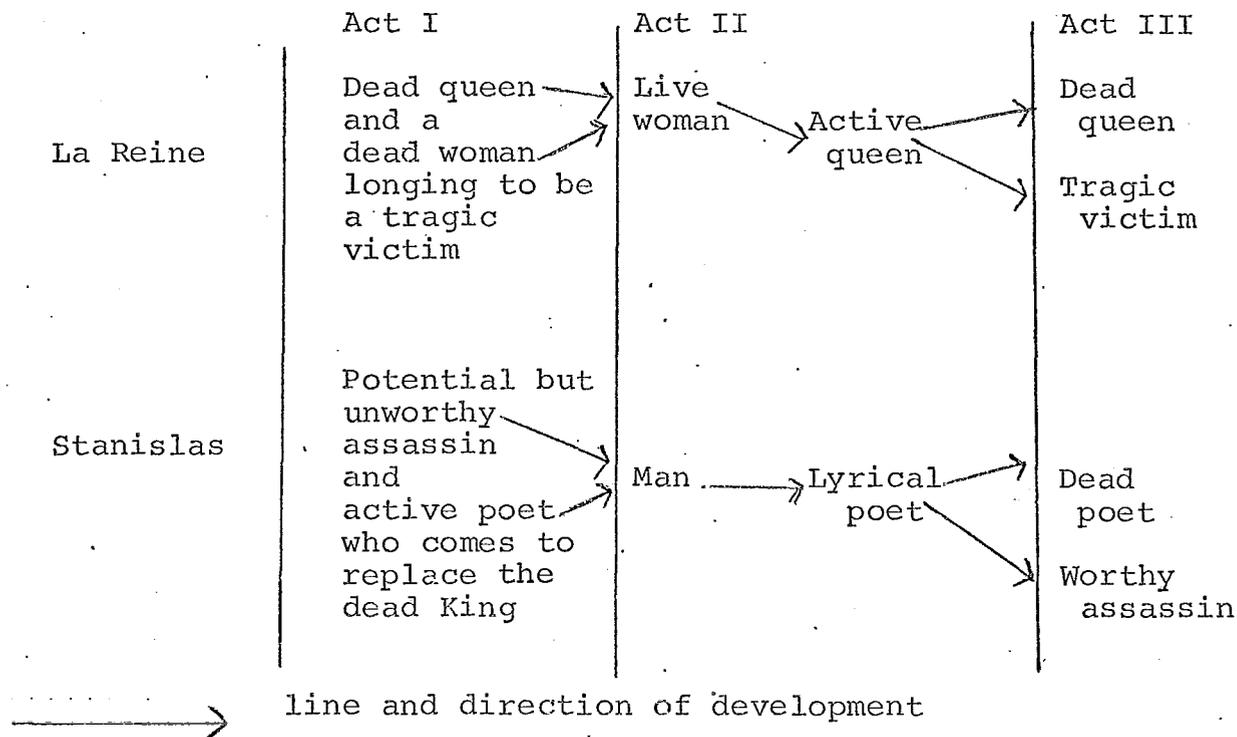
The play itself works towards the deaths of the two lovers and Cocteau describes the basis of dramatic action as follows:

Une reine d'esprit anarchiste, un anarchiste d'esprit royal, si le crime tarde, s'ils se parlent, si ce n'est plus le coup de couteau dans le dos de l'embarcadère du lac de Genève, notre reine ne sera pas longue à devenir une femme, pas long notre anarchiste à redevenir un homme. Ils trahissent leurs causes pour en former une. Ils deviennent une constellation, ou mieux un météore qui flambe une seconde et disparaît.¹⁷³

Cocteau likened this dramatic structure to a fugue and the rôles played out by Stanislas and la Reine are only in harmony in their deaths. The development of these rôles during the course of the play may be depicted diagrammatically:

¹⁷²L'Aigle à deux têtes, p. 7.

¹⁷³Ibid., pp. 5-6.



The changing relationship between la Reine and Stanislas is expressed by a series of active physical images. The entry of la Reine on stage from behind the dead King's portrait and her pretending to eat supper with him is an active image of her living with death. Her return to life, first as a woman and then as a queen who is prepared to reign, is visibly expressed when she raises the veil from her face, a veil which had previously denoted her severed contact from life. Her lowering of the veil before Stanislas¹⁷⁴ marks her death as a woman in his eyes. The

¹⁷⁴L'Aigle à deux têtes, p. 99.

coincidence in death of the rôles of la Reine is also visually expressed by the fact that she appears unveiled both before her assassin and her troops as she dies.

Stanislas's rôle is dictated by that of la Reine's but it is he who, in turn, effects the changes in her. His becoming a worthy assassin for la Reine is noted in his replacement of the dead King, a replacement which is actively remarked in Act I by la Reine's invitation to him to eat the meal set for the dead King and to sit in his chair; the replacement is facilitated by Stanislas's ressemblance to the dead King, a ressemblance which is emphasized by the portrait of the King in peasant costume and which is also an external sign of Stanislas's noble nature. He is tempted to kill la Reine in Act II so that the man and woman may be married in heaven but he realizes that la Reine in her assumption of her royal duties is already beyond his reach; he remarks:

C'est maintenant que je pourrais vous tuer
pour ne plus vous perdre.¹⁷⁵

Finally he kills la Reine supposing he is her spurned lover, a worthy assassin, because of his noble nature, and a poet

¹⁷⁵ L'Aigle à deux têtes, p. 99.

because of his purity and disorder. The ultimate failure of man and woman to unite in death is visually suggested by the distance which separates the corpses of the queen and poet-assassin; Stanislas lies dead at the bottom of the staircase while la Reine falls dead at the top. La Reine's illusion that her death is a nobly tragic one is apparent when Stanislas kills her out of love.

These active images of the changing relationship between Stanislas and la Reine also furnish some tableau effects within the drama. Stanislas's progression, for instance, is marked by his physical positions. In Act I he lies on the floor wounded before la Reine and sits at the table in her presence; in Act II he sits as he reads to her and his brief supremacy is noted as he stands behind her as she sits; his final subjection to her is depicted by his kneeling before her at the end of the act; in Act III his worthiness as executioner of la Reine's rôle and his love for her are apparent as he takes her in his arms.

La Reine herself is not as completely in charge of her destiny as she would like to believe; she shares this illusion with Cocteau's other suicides.¹⁷⁶ Her desire to preserve this illusion after her death is orally expressed when she orders Willenstein to report that events have turned out as she herself willed:

¹⁷⁶ See also p. 59.

Je vous demande de ne jamais oublier mes paroles, Willenstein. Et de témoigner devant les hommes que, quoi qu'il arrive, je l'ai voulu.¹⁷⁷

The events in L'Aigle à deux têtes have the trappings of a melodrama -- the raging storm, the isolated castle, the anarchistic poet, the tragic and lonely queen, the court intrigues. The claustrophobic and oppressive atmosphere is underlined throughout by the stage-set:

. . . ce décor fait d'ombres qui bougent, de pénombres, de lueurs du feu et des éclairs.¹⁷⁸

But it is an atmosphere in which la Reine thrives; her love of violence and passion is represented throughout both orally and visually, for she describes her riding through the storm and is seen compulsively attracted towards warmth.¹⁷⁹

Cocteau's precise dialogue and skilful staging thus strictly denote the development and phases in the lovers' progression towards death by their periods of lyricism and quietness, activity and passiveness.

Cocteau uses a limited number of techniques in his other historical drama, Bacchus, for it is principally a

¹⁷⁷ L'Aigle à deux têtes, pp. 147-148.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 91 and 141. Edith also remarks: "La reine aime voir le feu. Elle aime le feu et les fenêtres ouvertes", ibid., p. 14.

dialectic play, as is stated in the preface:

Bacchus est une pièce sur la bonté dure
que j'oppose à la bonté molle.¹⁸⁰

It is a series of chances¹⁸¹ which sets this opposition in motion and these chances are seen in the opening action of the play where it is determined who is to be Bacchus.

Hans's persecutuion as a peasant is graphically described in the man-hunt¹⁸² and premonitions of his martyrdom are given in the dialogue,¹⁸³ as are the repercussions of his free acts of pure disorder.¹⁸⁴

The presence in the décor of a copy of the Holbein painting of the family of Thomas More underlines Hans refusal to compromise his conscience. Cocteau makes Hans's choice between death and compromise of his conscience and liberty even more dramatic by Hans's being swayed in Act III from his goal, firstly because he loves Christine and then because he envisages his death as being unworthy of

¹⁸⁰Bacchus, p. 9.

¹⁸¹Ibid., p. 98. It was also by chance that Stanislas entered the queen's apartments. See also p. 82.

¹⁸²Bacchus, p. 58. Stanislas is the victim of another such man-hunt. See also pp. 50 and 81.

¹⁸³Premonitions of doom are heard firstly in the conversation between Lothar and Christine in Act I, Scene i, then in the meeting of the Church authorities in Act I, Scene iii.

¹⁸⁴These are related in Act II.

him.¹⁸⁵ However he accepts death in order to preserve his individual liberty and purity. Cocteau writes in his stage directions that Hans goes out alone onto the off-stage balcony where he is shot before the hostile crowd, an active expression of the solitude and persecution of the free man. The vanity and illusion of the virtual suicide¹⁸⁶ is apparent in the final action of the play as the Cardinal raises his hand to bless Hans's body, a visible portrayal of the forces of order outlasting the forces of disorder.

We have already pointed out¹⁸⁷ that the technical structure of Cocteau's plays is determined by the clash of opposing themes and that the ensuing deadlock is only resolved by the death of one of the main protagonists. Death can then be seen as the inevitable result of a dramatic progression; in Bacchus the Duke warns Christine:

Tu es déjà responsable de l'impasse dans laquelle il (Hans) se trouve. Ton devoir exige que tu tentes l'impossible pour l'aider à en sortir.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵Hans screams: "Il faut trouver quelque chose. Je ne veux pas de cette mort crapuleuse". Bacchus, p. 211.

¹⁸⁶See also pp. 59 and 151.

¹⁸⁷See also p. 94.

¹⁸⁸Bacchus, p. 204. La Reine in L'Aigle à deux têtes and Orphée also strive for the impossible.

Because of the victim's impotence to escape from this situation, death provides a liberation from the torture of the drama.¹⁸⁹

Cocteau reproduces the close, continuous and inevitable presence of death in his staging by the use of the colours of red and black in stage sets, properties, and accessories; it is la Reine in L'Aigle à deux têtes who explains this use of colour:

Le destin se sert d'un éventail noir et rouge pour montrer le sien (son visage).
Mais le sien ne change jamais.¹⁹⁰

Black is traditionally connected with the ideas of doom and death, red with the notions of passion, warmth, violence and blood. In accordance with these associations the nuptial chamber in La Machine infernale is "rouge comme une petite boucherie",¹⁹¹ Roméo et Juliette in the 1924 production was acted out against a black back-drop,¹⁹² L'Aigle à deux têtes is produced under a shadowy décor, most of Les Parents terribles in the penumbra of Yvonne's room, the whole of

¹⁸⁹ See also pp. 21 and 84.

¹⁹⁰ L'Aigle à deux têtes, p. 32.

¹⁹¹ La Machine infernale, O.C., V, 282. See also p. 122.

¹⁹² See also p. 137.

Le Boeuf sur le Toit in a murky setting, and Cocteau describes the set for La Voix Humaine as follows:

La scène, réduite, entourée du cadre rouge de draperies peintes, représente l'angle inégal d'une chambre de femme.¹⁹²

Also Acts I and II of La Machine infernale and Acts I and III of La Machine à écrire take place at night.

These colours may be taken up in both the stage properties and costumes. Orphée puts on the red gloves of Death,¹⁹³ the overcoats worn by the Commissaire and the Huissier are black, the horse's box padded in red velvet and closed off by a black curtain; the strips of material and costumes used in Roméo et Juliette were all black;¹⁹⁴ the woman in Le Bel Indifférent wears a black dress and la Reine in L'Aigle à deux têtes is dressed in her widow's weeds; the statue in Oedipe Roi is draped in red, the Prologue wears a black costume and Oedipe is escorted by a black angel; la Mort and Merlin both use black blindfolds and in Antigone the costumes are all worn over black leotards.

¹⁹² La Voix Humaine, O.C., VII, 57.

¹⁹³ See also pp. 104 and 109.

¹⁹⁴ See also p. 137.

Besides this visual technique, Cocteau also uses an active physical expression to denote the characters' closeness to death. Their gait is commonly that of the sleepwalker. Stanislas, for instance, moves "Comme hypnotisé"¹⁹⁵ and Death herself in Orphée moves in the same trance-like fashion;¹⁹⁶ when Stanislas makes his final entry on stage he crosses la Reine "comme endormie";¹⁹⁷ Oedipe and Jocaste fall asleep standing up as destiny whispers hints to them; Roméo walks "comme endormi";¹⁹⁸ Renaud and Olivier stand in sleep when the fairies enter; the characters in Le Boeuf sur le Toit are referred to as "noctambules"¹⁹⁹ and Paul in Les Enfants terribles has bouts of somnambulism.

This sleep-like state is akin to the process of poetic creation which places the artist in contact with death:

L'artiste . . . doit pouvoir se mettre dans un sommeil qui ne ressemble pas au sommeil, dans

¹⁹⁵ L'Aigle à deux têtes, p. 46.

¹⁹⁶ See also p. 102.

¹⁹⁷ L'Aigle à deux têtes, p. 148.

¹⁹⁸ Roméo et Juliette, O.C., VI, 20.

¹⁹⁹ Le Boeuf sur le Toit, O.C., VII, 311.

une lucidité supérieure et semblable à l'anesthésie du protoxyde d'azote. . . . A peine sommes-nous sous l'influence de ce gaz, que notre corps se décuple. La multiplication fourmille, et les nuances et les nuances de nuances, et les vitesses de vitesses et les sentiments . . . et les tribunaux et les sentences de morts et les pourvois.²⁰⁰

This process was acted out when Orphée underwent anaesthization in the realm of death to find Eurydice.²⁰¹

Cocteau's process of artistic creation and his poetic drama are both, then, in close communion with death. From this it is hardly surprising that his technical devices, such as the play's structure, the choice of themes and characters, the use of settings, stage properties, costumes, lighting, and new acting techniques, all serve to depict the presence of death throughout his drama and to prepare for its appearance within his theatre.

²⁰⁰ La fin du Potomak, O.C., II, 209-210. Cocteau even describes M. Chevalier's entertaining movements on stage as those of a "noctambule". Le foyer des artistes, O.C., XI, 384.

²⁰¹ See also p. 104.

CONCLUSION

It may be remarked from the preceding study that death provided a rich source of inspiration for Cocteau and that he expressed this richness through the many connotations which the theme of death held for him and through the wide variety of his synthetic techniques and unique concept of a poésie de théâtre. His own process of poetic creation, with its intuitions of the world of death, and his desire to both face and evade through the imagination the reality of death in his own life largely explains the continuous presence of death within his dramatic works.

Cocteau's notions of death as a dramatic theme are often long-established and, at times, platitudinous; his idea of man's acts being an illusion in a cruel universe, however, is essential to his poésie de théâtre where the real and imaginary worlds are simultaneously depicted. The theatre, by its very nature, allows an imagined fabrication to become one kind of reality but Cocteau's own dramatic reality results from his creation on stage of both his characters' imaginary world, and their supposedly real setting.

Linked with other dramatic themes, the theme of death provided Cocteau with a valuable resource of material for his many experiments with the potentialities of different theatrical genres. His innovations in technique range

from the neo-classic to the theatrical, the mysterious, the melodramatic, the absurd and the Romantic. He tried to revitalize old types of drama by infusing into them techniques taken from the dance, ballet, music, pantomime, mime, acrobatics, poetry, song, the plastic arts, circus, and music-hall, as well as exploring the use of mask, settings, costumes, lighting, and stage properties. Cocteau would also use his talents in radio, television, and films, and the knowledge and experience which he gained in these media helped him broaden the means of expression within the theatre; he suggested, for instance, the use of camera stills or postures on stage as well as writing material to explore the potentialities of the human voice.¹ These synthetic techniques are dictated by his desire to invent new ways in which to interrogate death more closely² and are indispensable to his poésie de théâtre the novelty of which he describes as follows:

Révolution qui ouvre toute grande une
porte aux explorateurs. Les jeunes peuvent
poursuivre des recherches, où la féerie,
la danse, l'acrobatie, la pantomime, le
drame, la satire, l'orchestre, la parole

¹Cocteau refers to his composition, Anna la Bonne, as "une chanson parlée". Portraits-souvenir, O.C., XI, 19.

²See also p. 77.

combinés réapparaissent sous une forme inédite; ils monteront, sans moyens de fortune, ce que les artistes officiels prennent pour des farces d'atelier, et qui n'en est pas moins l'expression plastique de la poésie.³

It is, therefore, this highly unusual concept of a poésie de théâtre and its striking technical transposition on stage through processes of trompe-l'esprit which make Cocteau a very modern and original man of the theatre and underline the freshness of his approach to drama.

In certain respects, however, it is to be regretted that Cocteau did not perfect the techniques which he initiated, for the unexploited form of some of his dramatic techniques may erroneously suggest the appearance of multiple and unconnected experiments rather than of a well developed poetic drama. Cocteau was certainly a touche-à-tout but this fact serves to emphasize, rather than detract from, the great diversity of his ability and interests. In Le Cordon Ombilical Cocteau comments upon this diverseness which redeems his works from any fear of uniformity or monotony:

C'est l'ensemble qui compte et la répétition d'un style provoquerait cet ennui qu'on respecte et que les lecteurs prennent pour une fidélité à soi-même, alors qu'il ne résulte que d'une paresse.⁴

³Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 16-17. See also p. 98. Essences and man's innate qualities, such as angélisme, poetry, beauty, may thus be portrayed on stage.

⁴Jean Cocteau, Le Cordon Ombilical (Paris, 1962), p.15.

Cocteau's presentation of death on stage in such arrestingly new ways also runs the risk of distracting from the theme which they embody. Elements of spectacle or surprise may be so eye-catching or the notion of an active imagery so misunderstood⁵ that they prevent the audience from looking behind them to the ideas contained; the audience would then be more preoccupied with the process of dévoilement than by with what is in this way revealed. Cocteau had anticipated his audience's reaction of baffled disconcertment before the uniqueness of his work:

Or, la surface d'une oeuvre nouvelle heurte, intrigue, agace trop le spectateur pour qu'il entre. Il est détourné de l'âme par le visage, par l'expression inédite qui le distrait comme une grimace de clown à la porte.⁶

He realized that it would take time before his public could be trained to react with all their faculties, and not just the intellect, to his drama and so be fully receptive to his poésie de théâtre, which demanded a very simple response:

⁵Cocteau was, for instance, attacked by irrate members of his audience after the first production of Parade and anticipated this possible response to Orphée in the prologue; the actor who plays the part of Orphée begs the audience: "Je vous demanderai donc d'attendre la fin pour vous exprimer si notre travail vous mécontente". Orphée, O.C., V, 17.

⁶Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 14.

Les esprits simples voient les fées plus facilement que les autres, car ils n'opposent pas au prodige la résistance des esprits forts.⁷

Cocteau had seen that, because of the audience's lack of familiarity with his new approach to poetic drama, his own rôle would be restricted to that of a technician; in

Le numéro Barbette he writes:

Le génie est un cadeau du ciel. Le soin seul nous incombe de lui fabriquer un véhicule, puisqu'il nous faut, jusqu'à nouvel ordre, jouer notre fluide par la bande et hypnotiser faiblement le monde par l'entremise de l'air. Cela limite le rôle de l'artiste à celui de main-d'oeuvre.⁸

Cocteau attempts to make his drama appeal to the senses and imaginative faculties as well as the intellect and he tried to convey it through means other than the spoken word, an inadequate vehicle for the total expression of feelings, sensations and fancies. It is a fundamental premise of his poésie de théâtre that, if this total expression were successful, it would give a more complete realism as it actively represents the real and imaginary worlds and so is "plus vrai que le vrai".⁹ Cocteau states this view in

⁷ Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 11. See also pp. 128-129.

⁸ Le numéro Barbette, O.C., IX, 257.

⁹ Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 12.

in Le Mystère laïc:

Le vrai réalisme consiste à montrer les choses surprenantes que l'habitude cache sous une housse et nous empêche de voir.¹⁰

Cocteau's mise en scène, with its use of unusual visual and physical images, helps him achieve this greater realism by enabling the real and imaginary worlds to be suggested throughout his drama, as did his theme of the illusory nature of man's acts in a real world. His techniques of staging, such as the use of a claustrophobic setting, a décor qui bouge, and harsh and subdued lighting, vividly express and actively reinforce his portrayal of the suffocation and oppression of man in the reality of a hostile universe and the comforting shades of illusion which man invents for himself.

It is in his freshness of approach to many different dramatic genres, and in his opening of the way to further experimentation with the potential resources of the theatre as a means of poetic communication that Cocteau's influence in the theatre lies. His contribution to and enrichment of the theatre as a genre make him first and foremost a technician and show him to be continuing in the tradition of

¹⁰Le Mystère laïc, O.C., X, 31.

Copeau¹¹ and the Cartel des Quatre¹² whose fresh approach to dramatic production had salvaged French theatre after la belle époque.¹³ Cocteau himself certainly achieved his intention of breaking with the naturalistic theatre¹⁴ by his devising of a new kind of poetic drama. His early theatre, such as Parade¹⁵ and Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, was born out of a synthesis which is impossible to recreate but his later theatrical works reveal the permanence of his innovatory techniques and continue to demonstrate his many talents and his great originality in the creation of a poésie de théâtre.

¹¹Cocteau also continued with Copeau's idea that theatre was a group activity. See also p. 136.

¹²Dullin produced Cocteau's adaptations, Jovet La Machine infernale and Pitoëff the most poetic dramas of Cocteau such as Orphée.

¹³La belle époque is also sometimes called the Banquet Years and roughly covers the years 1900-1914.

¹⁴Cocteau said of the naturalistic theatre of his own time: "Nous voici maintenant à l'époque où le public, convaincu par Antoine, se fâche si on ne pose pas sur scène de véritables objets, si on ne le jette pas dans une intrigue aussi compliquée, aussi longue, que celles dont le théâtre devrait servir à le distraire". Préface de 1922, Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel, O.C., VII, 11-12.

¹⁵Parade had been Cocteau's first attempt in re-viving the theatre; he considered it "une lucarne ouverte sur ce que devrait être le théâtre contemporain". Le Coq et l'arlequin, O.C., IX, 30.

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